



ZOE E.
WHITTEN

BLOOD
RELATIONS

Blood Relations

An Amber McKenzie Story

Zoe E. Whitten

© 2008 Zoe E. Whitten

Users may copy this story for personal use; and they may distribute it in whole to other parties, provided that no changes are made to the document, and that no profits are made from the transfer. Users may also quote sections for review purposes so long as the review also includes a method of downloading the full file. All commercial uses of this document are restricted, and any such uses will require the author's written consent.

Blood Relations is a work of fiction, and the events portrayed within this work come solely from the imagination of the writer. Any perceived likenesses from this story to real persons or events are strictly coincidental. Locations which are real have been used fictitiously.

For more free stories, go to:

<http://www.zoewhitten.com/content/stories.html>

Warning!

The story you are about to read is a sequel and a spin-off at the same time. If you have not read the following stories at this point:

Shadow Walker

Touched

Erick's Journey

The Lesser of Two Evils

Trail of Madness

Redemption Lost

It *might* be a good idea to hold off on reading this story, at least until you've read the three free stories available from my web site. (Free stories are listed in *Italic*) You don't need all of the information contained in those stories, but some of the situations in this story will make a lot more sense once you've gone through the other freebies. Really.

If you haven't yet read the *Campaign Trilogy* in print or e-book form, then it's best if you skip the prologue and go straight to chapter one. That will give you a story with less spoilers about the events in the *Campaign Trilogy*, allowing you to later be surprised by the various twists in the novels, should you choose to buy them. And the events in this novel will not affect either Jobe McKenzie or Wendy Stoffel, at least, not until later in the series. Muah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!

Ahem. Right, I've got the obligatory warning out of the way, so I'll let you get on with it then.

Z.E.W.

Prologue

Thursday, July 17, 1997

San Antonio, Texas

Vicky's stomach was a hard, angry knot that growled in protest at being empty for too long. Her knees ached from crouching behind a dumpster without moving, but patrolling for meals made her feel woozy.

Her head pounded from a headache that was brought on by two nights without food, and it felt like a mallet was constantly thumping the back of her skull. Her fangs throbbed, and her hunger was so intense that her mind wandered to fantasies of ripping open a victim's throat.

She pushed aside the thought angrily. It was biting victims that got her in trouble in the first place.

It had been roughly seven months before when Vicky fled from Tucson with her roommates, Amber McKenzie and Marcus Wrigley, though neither needed to run with her. Vicky was the only one who'd been stupid enough to leave behind a trail of bodies with bite marks.

She didn't feel guilt for her actions, and in her brief life of close to nine decades, she had never felt bad over taking live meals. She was a vampire, and humans were food. But she had been trained to hunt and feed more discreetly, and she felt frustration at the turn of events which left her with no choice but to feed with reckless abandon.

Her problems began when she agreed to work with Wendy Stoffel in a futile effort to stop a daemonic ritual from being completed.

Vicky allowed herself a thin smile at the memory of Wendy, a pale, blue-eyed halfling who thought of herself as a mutant. Wendy lost most of her family in Texas, and she might have been killed herself had she not run into Jobe McKenzie, Amber's older brother.

Amber's berserker brother, Vicky thought.

Wendy and Jobe had been working together to investigate a series of grisly murders, all of whom were connected to a group of rogue Army soldiers. The vigilantes followed the trail of the men to Tucson, and it was there that Wendy met Amber. Being eager to help one of her brother's friends, Amber had invited Wendy back to her apartment to meet her roommates.

Vicky supposed that Amber was so eager to help Wendy, because there was nothing she could do to help her brother. With Jobe's problems, she couldn't even go near him without provoking him into a rage.

Berserker, Vicky thought again and shuddered. Inside Jobe was a wild animal that could be triggered by contact with his family, among other things. He ran away from home to avoid hurting anyone, but Amber tracked her brother down. Not knowing the danger that she was in, Amber tried to persuade Jobe to return home. For her troubles, she was put in the hospital for several weeks.

Vicky had no idea what Jobe looked like, because she'd never bothered to make introductions. She knew from past experience how berserkers acted around vampires, and one thrashing was more than enough to teach her a lesson.

Vicky let her thoughts return to Wendy, who met Amber at the University of Arizona. After hearing Wendy's story, Amber tried to convince Vicky to help Wendy locate the men behind the rituals. Wendy was skeptical that Vicky was a real vampire, but once she'd been convinced, she offered Vicky a free feeding as a small bribe.

Vicky had to force her mind away from the taste of Wendy's blood quickly, because it made her stomach ache even worse.

Vicky refused to help initially, because the odds against them were just too great. It was only after Jobe had been abducted by the soldiers that Vicky agreed to help, and by then, everyone understood that they were heading into an ambush.

Her memories blurred to the point when she'd been wounded. In an attack made by a group of soldiers in a van, Vicky took three rifle rounds to the lower stomach, and yet she still kept fighting. She'd killed and drained five of the soldiers, but it hadn't been enough to fill the holes left by the bullets.

Vicky stumbled home, and Wendy made a vain attempt to heal the grievous wounds by feeding Vicky. It wasn't nearly enough, so Wendy raided a hospital's blood supplies. Wendy and Amber worked together to bind Vicky's wounds, and without both of them fighting to keep her alive, Vicky wouldn't have survived.

Their efforts weren't enough to get Vicky back on her feet, and Wendy left to track down some of Vicky's pets at the Asylum, the nightclub where Vicky took her meals.

Vicky was still lying in a pool of her own blood when Wendy was snatched from the packed nightclub by a daemon. Vicky should have been angry about Wendy being taken on her home turf, or about being wounded by the soldiers. She was, to a certain extent, and she'd even told herself that she was lashing out in anger over being shot.

But in truth, she was scared shitless by the idea that the daemon might come for Amber next. It was panic and desperation that forced her to consider a stupid, near suicidal plan of attack on the soldiers.

After Vicky recovered enough to hunt on her own, she fed on a pair of criminals. She'd drained both men before feeling healthy enough to fight. That didn't stop her from draining more of the soldiers when she had the chance.

By then, it wasn't about feeding or healing. Being afraid for Amber's safety made Vicky restless and too eager to feed on her enemies. She wanted the soldiers to feel as much fear as she did before she killed them. She longed to taste the terror in their blood and know that they were frightened of her.

The sheer number of drained victims cropping up all at once meant she couldn't go back to work at the blood bank. She couldn't go back to the club to take little sips from willing pets. She couldn't collect gauze pads from her pets to make tea. Most of all, she couldn't stay in Tucson with every cop in town looking for her.

Vicky had to resort back to her wandering gypsy lifestyle, claiming a few victims in each town or city before she moved on. In some places, no one was hanging out at night, but Vicky refused to break into homes to look for her meals. It was one of the few courtesies she could offer to the humans, only hunting on those foolish enough to be out alone at night. On the nights when she couldn't find someone outside, she went hungry.

It was hard on her, but it had been even harder for Amber and Marcus. Vicky's friends had fought over her nightly. The arguments usually started with Amber insisting that there had to be "another way" to keep Vicky fed. Marcus didn't like to think about what Vicky did when she left their motel rooms each night any more than Amber did. But he knew there wasn't an alternative, and in his frustration with Amber, he constantly reminded her that they were on the run because she'd decided to help Wendy. Things usually slid downhill and got ugly from there.

Vicky was almost glad when Marcus left Amber. She'd hated listening to their bitter fights, and it frustrated her that Marcus blamed the whole mess on Amber. She also hated putting up with Amber whining that there had to be another way, because there wasn't.

Sure, she could try to subsist on cow or pig blood, but neither tasted very good. Both were junk food, something to be taken as a snack when real food wasn't available.

Like now, for instance, Vicky thought, bringing herself back to the present, and back to the San Antonio alleyway where she huddled behind a dumpster, waiting for anyone to

show up. She didn't care if it was a drug dealer or a drug addict by then. She just wanted something in her stomach.

Farther down the alley, a cat growled. He started to sing an angry song about spending another night aching with hunger.

Vicky could relate.

Chapter 1

Friday, July 18, 1997

Somewhere around midnight, someone threw a can at the cat. The smell of tuna in oil filled the air. The cat fell silent, aside from the occasional smack while he ate. He finished and left the alley, purring in a loud rumble to announce his pleasure at having a full belly.

Fuck you, Vicky thought. Next time I see you, cat, I'll eat you.

Which was a lie, since cat blood tasted atrocious. It was like drinking cow's blood mixed with ammonia, in Vicky's opinion. Still, nothing else in the alleyway stirred, and even that foul taste wasn't sounding so bad to her aching stomach.

Hoping to stave herself off the idea of hunting for cats, Vicky let her memory drift back to three weeks before, when Marcus used Amber's laptop to set up an internet account. He'd checked his university e-mail account and found a message from his brother, Felix, who wrote to say that Marcus needed to return home immediately to discuss a very important family matter. It was just the excuse that Marcus needed to run, and he did. He didn't call, or write, and Amber cried for the better part of four days.

Which was how Vicky ended up stuck with Amber in San Antonio. Then Vicky's life became complete hell...Heil...whatever.

It wasn't that Amber pitched fits about Vicky feeding. But she stayed up every night, waiting for Vicky to return home. Always, she sat at the foot of her bed, her wide brown eyes searching Vicky's face for the small signs that she'd fed. Amber checked every night as soon as Vicky walked in. She knew that a light bluish tint to Vicky's skin was a sign of a recent feeding, while Vicky's current chalk white appearance was evidence of an empty stomach.

If Amber saw proof that Vicky fed, she looked away as she undressed herself. Sometimes she felt the need to state the obvious, but other times, she just went mute and crawled into bed to avoid looking at Vicky.

Long before Marcus left, Amber stopped eating properly. She seemed to starve herself for every time that Vicky fed. Amber punished herself for every victim, letting guilt eat at her until she was pale white and far too skinny.

Vicky felt nothing over feeding, since humans were just food to her. But she couldn't suppress an ache of regret each night when she watched Amber undress with her back turned to Vicky, revealing an emaciated frame. Her ribs showed through her alabaster skin even when she had her arms at her sides. Her chest was shrinking, her hips stretched out her skin, and her legs were boney rails.

But worst of all, Amber's round cheeks, which gave her face a doll-like appearance, had melted away. Instead, her sunken cheeks and eyes made her look like an anorexic fashion model who had gone too far with her diet.

It wasn't fair. One of them had to starve for the other to eat. Whenever Vicky came home famished, Amber gorged throughout the day and took cat naps. Even if she ate well, it would take her months to gain back her weight, and Vicky didn't think she could put up with a strict diet. Not again, and not for any reason.

It was the real bitch of being a vampire. Not just any blood could work, and even the types that did sometimes weren't nutritionally complete for a vampire. The only blood which fulfilled their every need was human blood.

A vampire could subsist on cows and pigs for a few weeks, but after that, there would need to be a few humans added in as "chasers." Otherwise, a vampire's muscles began melting away. They moved more sluggishly, as though they were taking on the lazy qualities of their domesticated victims.

Heavy, clumping footsteps brought her attention up to the front of the alley. A drunk was weaving into the shadows, already fumbling with his zipper while he looked for a place to empty his full bladder. He chose the other side of the same dumpster Vicky crouched behind.

Sorry Amber, Vicky thought as she rose silently. It looks like you're the one who's starving tonight.

Vicky waited for the drunk to finish relieving himself, if for no other reason than to avoid him wetting her knee length leather jacket. But she didn't wait for him to zip up before she closed one arm around his chest and pinned both his arms to his sides. Her other hand rose to pull the man's head to one side, snapping his neck. It was all she could do to make the matter less grim for

Amber. She could at least promise that her victims didn't suffer.

Spinning the body around, she pinned it to the wall with one hand and dug in her coat pocket for a switchblade knife. She dipped the blade to slash the man's jugular vein. But without a pulse, there was no wide splash of blood, only a seeping rivulet of red which soaked into the T-shirt and sweatshirt the drunk wore.

Being careful not to use her teeth, Vicky closed her mouth over the wound. She shoved her hand over the dead man's heart and drew back on the wound hard, swallowing blood in loud, greedy gulps.

It was still warm, and pleasantly spiced by the man's fear. She couldn't enjoy his struggling final spasms, but she was more than content to eat without playing with her food.

Vicky fell into a bloodlust, moaning in pleasure as her senses heightened. Then all at once she gasped and drew her head away from the wound. Her bloodlust faded, and her sense of smell dulled, taking with it the faint odor she'd picked up on the wind.

It was a scent she didn't know, one she'd never smelled before in her life. Yet something about the acrid scent of sickness filled her with dread.

What the hell is that? she thought.

Reluctantly, Vicky dropped her meal and leaped up to grab the railing on the first floor of the building's fire escape stairway. She climbed four floors to the rooftop and opened her mouth to pant. There was no trace of the acrid scent on the wind, but there was something else, a powerful pheromone scent that made Vicky's heart thump like a kettle drum. She panted harder,

first through her mouth, and then her nose, drawing in more of the new scent in disbelief.

A man. Not a human male, but a vampire; and damn, he smelled good!

His scent was fading. He was moving away from her into the wind, so there would be no chance for him to catch her scent. Vicky took off at a full run and leapt over the edge of the building. She dropped into the street and landed with a thump she felt all over her body. She didn't care. She was too excited to think of her own safety, too excited to think anything but a giddy mantra, *a man, a man, a man...*

The wind shifted, and she lost track of him as the air began pushing locks of her blue-black hair around her face. Her excitement became tense frustration just as quickly, and she clambered up the side of a parking garage, hoping in vain to catch his scent and his trail again.

Vicky paced the roof, her face bunched in a pensive glower. But her bad attitude didn't change the direction of the wind, which ignored her even when she let out a loud, feral scream of bitterness.

Behind her, a rumbling chuckle exploded in the following silence.

Vicky spun on her heel, and her voice caught in her throat at the sight of the vampire. He was taller than her by four inches, and well-fed judging by the fullness of his cheeks. He wore a simple outfit of a black T-shirt, black leather pants, and black combat boots. His hands were encased in leather driving

gloves which left the backs of his white hands exposed.

His face was square and pale white, with only his lips showing a light trace of blue. His eyes carried a soft amber color within bands of onyx.

Vicky wanted to laugh and say something like, “Amber is my favorite color.”

Instead she raised her eyes to stare at his silky mane of long black hair, parted on the right, and pulled back into a loose tail. It looked immaculately clean and smelled of hair tonic.

He broke the silence first, uncurling his thick arms away from his chest to drop them to his sides in a relaxed pose.

Vicky stopped breathing, because his posture was too relaxed. He’d just gone into stance.

“Friend or foe?” he asked.

“Friend, I hope,” Vicky said, keeping perfectly still. If she also tried to relax into a stance, he would be on her in an instant, and she didn’t want to start the relationship on the wrong foot.

He was, after all, the first vampire she’d met since her parents abandoned her in her early teens. “I was tracking another scent when I came across yours and followed you.” Vicky smiled and exposed her fangs. “I’m Vicky.”

“Emil,” he said and waved a hand for her to relax. “You can breathe now. I believe you.”

Vicky did, loosening the knot between her shoulders. “Did you smell it too?”

“Yes, I was tracking the scent when the wind shifted, and then I caught scent of you and realized you were on my tail. So

I doubled back, and, here we are.” Emil beamed a grin, his teeth pink from a recent feeding. “I notice from your smile that you must have helped yourself to the local fare. You didn’t bite your victim, did you?”

“No, I slit his throat. I’m trying to keep my kills clean so—” Vicky’s eyes widened in horror as a thought occurred to her. “Oh shit, this is your town.”

“Something like that, yes.”

Vicky dropped to one knee, popping her kneecap on the pavement. “I’m sorry, liege. If I’d known, I would have—”

He was in front of her without making a sound, his hand slipping under her armpit to pull her up onto her feet. “You don’t need to go through the formalities.” His grin returned when she raised her gaze back to his. “You must have had good parents if you know the old ways.”

“They taught me everything they knew before they left me,” Vicky said.

“Then they’ve taught you more than most folks teach their whelps these days.” Emil leaned over, nuzzling his cheek against the side of Vicky’s neck while he inhaled deeply. He breathed in through his mouth first, and then through his nose.

He was “sampling her,” an act made even more intimate when his lips brushed her earlobe. “Why were you following me?” he whispered, pulsing cool breath over her skin.

“I’m looking for a home, and for a partner,” Vicky said honestly. “I was forced to flee from Tucson after—”

“That was your work?” Emil asked, cutting her off. He leaned backed and faked a pout, though his dark eyes glimmered with mirth. “That was ugly to read about in the newspaper. The story made it sound like a whelp walked into town right after being abandoned.”

Vicky dropped her head to hide her embarrassed expression. Once Emil was so close to her, she could tell by his scent that he was old. Emil had at least celebrated his first millennia. Vicky didn’t know her true age, but she knew she wasn’t over one hundred yet. And so in Emil’s eyes, she was little more than a whelp.

She tried to explain using a highly edited version of the truth. “I’ve been on my own for a long time, but I was wounded badly by soldiers. I took three rifle rounds to the gut, and between trying to heal and trying to cool my tempter, I got sloppy.”

Emil’s pout became genuine as he nodded. “All right, that explains a few things.” He stepped back, offering no further comment before he waved an invitation for her to follow him. Then he took off at a full run.

Vicky tried to keep up, but he was so fast that he had to stop and wait for her many times while they moved to the southwestern outskirts of the city. To say the trip was humbling would have been a gross understatement.

The house Emil led her to was huge, but it was a square white box with no personality. It should have looked out of place, but four other homes on the block were just as big, and just as ugly.

Vicky's senses picked up the other three vampires as she entered the front yard, but she couldn't ask questions about how many others weren't at home. Not while she was running to catch up to Emil, who stood at the door with his hand clasped around the knob.

The vampires smelled her as well, and the trio was already standing in the foyer when Emil led Vicky inside.

Vicky couldn't talk. She was overwhelmed with emotion when she saw the one female in the group had a greatly swelled stomach.

All three were dressed in black, a fashion quirk of vampires that they seemed genetically loathe to violate. Both the men dressed in a style similar to Emil, while the woman wore a loose black dress. She was the only vampire in the room not wearing combat boots.

Barefoot and pregnant. Is her place in the kitchen? Vicky thought, biting back on the laugh that threatened to erupt from her lips.

The pregnant woman was shorter than Vicky, standing six foot, two inches. Her silky blue-black hair was similar to Vicky's, though she wore hers shorter, cropped at her shoulders with a curtain of bangs that hid half of her slender black eyebrows. The woman's irises carried a similar mixture of onyx and chips of blue ice. But her jaw wasn't nearly as wide, nor were her cheek bones very prominent. Her smooth features gave her an oval-shaped face, and she seemed quite pretty because of her expression, a combination of happiness and curiosity.

The woman's muscular frame wasn't nearly as defined, and Vicky guessed that she hadn't needed to hunt for quite a while to look so smooth. The woman presented a paradox, her body's appearance suggesting she hadn't hunted in months, while her rounded cheeks hinted that she was well fed.

Vicky didn't mean to stare, but for many years, she'd harbored a desire to have a child of her own. She didn't bother speaking about it, or even thinking about it, because without a male around, there was no point.

But here, finally, were at least two males without partners, and Vicky tore her gaze away from the woman to study the men. They both stood on either side of the woman protectively. One of them was the father, but Vicky couldn't tell which, because they both stood so closely by her sides.

The man on the woman's right was unique in a way, having natural blond hair which made his face seem even paler. His square face was also rounded by being well fed, and his feeding habits created a puffiness in his cheeks and under his enchanting crimson eyes. He was the shorter of the two males at six foot six, but he was also stockier, his chest so well defined that the ridges of his muscles could be seen through his T-shirt.

The man on the woman's left had jet black hair which was shoulder-length, and parted in the middle, creating a silky curtain on either side of his ruggedly handsome face. His eyes were mixed with hints of fiery yellow, though the outer band was more dark grey than a true black. He was the slimmest of the three males, and he could have almost been describes as gangly.

While she dropped her eyes to appraise his lean body, she spotted a brass ring around his left ring finger, and her gaze moved to the woman's hands, finding a matching ring on the right.

Emil pointed out the female first. "Vicky, this is Claudia. On her left is her partner, Charles, and on her right is Lucas. Please, say hello to my coven."

Vicky stepped forward, and the three vampires surrounded her, moving in close to sample her scent and her taste. She breathed in to sample them as well, surprised to discover none were much older than her.

When they moved away from Vicky, Emil led her back through the main hall into the kitchen. He took a green glass bottle out of the refrigerator that might have once been meant to contain wine. But he uncapped the top, and the scent of human blood filled the air as he poured a glass and handed it to Vicky.

She sipped it, moving to lean on the counter while Emil put the bottle away. It didn't escape her notice that every shelf was full of bottles. Vicky estimated it was a stock of at least six or seven victims' worth.

"How many of those does Claudia need?"

Emil chuckled. "She only goes through two victims per day unless she's in a frenzy, but it's easy enough to get blood around here." Emil closed the refrigerator and leaned against the door, folding his arms while he regarded Vicky with a bland, passive expression. "I've collected my coven over the last forty years. Charles was the first, but they all arrived for the same reason. They were whelps running away from their messes."

Vicky almost coughed on a mouthful of blood. “Um, for—” She lapped at a drop leaking from the corner of her mouth and tried again. “For the record, that wasn’t entirely my mess. I just got sucked into it.”

Emil nodded, saying nothing while Vicky finished the glass. She set it aside on the counter, and he asked, “Would you like to stay with us?”

“I can’t, not tonight.” Vicky tried to think of a way to describe Amber, then decided to go with the closest vampire term that Emil might not disapprove of. “I have a pet.”

Emil made a quiet snort. “I’ll take in pets if they’re properly trained.”

Vicky laughed, a genuine relaxed laugh that eased all of the tension out of her in one outburst. “Trust me, Amber’s far from trained. The little creampuff won’t even let me snack off her unless I’m really dying.”

Emil’s smile became softer, and he leaned his head to one side, studying Vicky with an expression that seemed perplexed. “How old is she, and how long have you had her?”

“I believe she’s twenty-four, and she’s lived with me for close to two years now. She wasn’t my first pet, and I had another named Marcus until just recently. But he got tired of fighting with Amber, and now he’s gone.”

The perplexed expression faded, and Emil’s eyes glimmered with mirth as he asked, “Is Amber much trouble?”

“Loads of trouble,” Vicky agreed before she laughed again. “I’m not being fair to the creampuff. She does have her

good points. Amber is part halfling, and she's a low power mage. She helped me to amass a bit of money with her abilities."

Emil nodded, but said nothing. He was waiting for further explanation, so Vicky told him how Amber had used a locator spell to hunt down abducted people in high profile missing persons cases. She concluded by saying, "I know it sounds like I let her talk me into being one of the good guys, but the money was hard to turn down. We both made six figure salaries last year, and that wasn't factoring in my real job working for the blood bank."

"What went wrong?" Emil asked.

"We took on a job we shouldn't have accepted," Vicky said.

She explained how she and Amber got involved with Wendy Stoffel, and the more she talked, the more Emil's mouth tightened in a thin line. But there was no skepticism in his expression.

In his entire long life, Emil had never seen a daemon. But he believed in them, just as he believed in all the lore he'd learned from his parents. He had also met his fair share of halflings, magi, and other "mythical creatures," so he could easily believe Vicky's story from start to finish.

When she lapsed into quiet, he asked, "Do you think that thing we were tracking tonight was a daemon?"

"It might be, but this scent is very different. I've smelled two daemons, and one of those, I only smelled as a lingering odor on Marcus. This scent is more like...like a sick animal, I guess."

“Two daemons?” Emil shook his head. “Back up and explain that, please.”

Vicky did, describing how she had come to meet Amber, and Annul, the daemon who had hunted Amber. But when Vicky talked about her fight with Annul, Emil’s eyes bulged wide with disbelief.

He cut her off mid-sentence with a barking laugh. “You fought a daemon on your own?”

“I didn’t have a choice. He was about to kill my frien—my pets.”

Emil chuckled at her verbal slip and waved his hand. “You don’t have to lie to me. I know from your face that this girl is more than just a friend.”

Vicky dropped her head, then shook it quickly. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“That act might work on humans, but I can hear your heart from here. So when I say you love Amber.” Emil paused to laugh and nod. “Your heart bursts into a drumroll.”

There was no way to lie then, because Vicky’s heart *was* pounding. She sighed and raised a hand to rub her forehead. “I’ve got to be an idiot, falling in love with food.”

“A halfling is hardly food,” Emil said. “I’d be delighted to snack on one, but killing them?” He shook his head when Vicky looked up. “No, that would be like killing one of our own for no reason.”

Vicky tried not to tense up, but there was something implied in the statement that she didn’t like. “You’ve killed

another vampire.” It wasn’t a question, but a direct accusation.

“I have. Sometimes vampires who have no self-control come through my city. Leaving victims with bite marks is bad for us, and so I ask them to leave or start being more discreet. If they don’t, I kill them.”

Vicky nodded, releasing a slow breath. “How many have you killed?”

“Only four.”

“Only?” Vicky pouted at him. “Your coven has only four vampires, but you’re the first I’ve seen since my teens.”

“You’re upset with me.” Emil raised his hands in a placating gesture. “I’m well aware that our population is exceedingly low, but there is an order which must be respected, or the humans will start hunting us again. You know that. It’s why you worked so hard in Tucson to lead a peaceful life. I have just as peaceful a life here. Those bottles?” Emil dropped his hand to pat the refrigerator door. “They’re filled by IV collections from pets.”

“What?” Vicky shook her head. “But then that would require—”

“I have 146 pets living in this city,” Emil said. “They would all donate at the same time if I asked, but as you can see, we don’t have much demand here, aside from Claudia.”

Vicky’s expression became confused. “If you have all these pets, why were you hunting tonight?”

“It’s good to go hunting sometimes.” Emil offered a shrug at her confused expression. “Tonight, I waited outside a 24-hour gym. I prefer looking for big targets, like bodybuilders or

those late night joggers. Just a few minutes ago, I chased down a bodybuilder. He was almost as big as me, and once I cornered him in the parking garage, he put up one hell of a fight. I don't hunt like this often, but I need it sometimes. It helps to keep me on my toes, and it lets me know where I stand with the enemy."

Vicky nodded. "All right, I can see that."

"If you aren't staying here, perhaps you should be getting back to your abode. It is just about an hour before dawn."

Vicky glanced around at the clock on the wall and nodded, pushing away from the counter. "I'll give you the address if you want to stop by tomorrow night."

Emil asked, "Looking for an easy meal?"

Vicky nodded and grinned. "If you've got bottles stocked up like that..." She trailed off at a sudden thought and laughed to herself. "Anyway, I wouldn't turn down an invitation if you made one."

Emil was across the room in an instant. He grabbed her upper arm and pulled her around to stare intently into her eyes. "Are you sure you aren't feeling guilt over me killing innocent humans?"

"Does a human feel guilty for enjoying a steak?" Vicky asked. Emil kept hold of her arm, and she knew that he was looking for a direct answer. "No, I was just angry that you might put yourself at risk when you have so much at stake here. But of course you're a good hunter, and you favor clean kills. You don't bite, do you?"

"No," Emil said.

"Then I appreciate your logic for hunting, and I can accept it."

Emil nodded, understanding what she was implying. “What about Amber? Would she accept it?”

Vicky left without answering him. He let her go, but his pensive expression said that the subject would be brought up again.

Vicky said quiet good-byes to the other vampires as she passed the den, and once she got out the front door, she broke into a full run. She ran partway back across town, stopping at an all-night grocery store to pick up sandwiches and a bottle of milk.

Vicky had a plan to get Amber to eat.

Amber sat at the foot of the bed, hunched over with her arms resting on her lap until the door opened. She straightened up and turned her head, her eyes dropping as soon as she saw Vicky’s face. “You fed.”

“Yeah, I did, but you need to listen, okay?” Vicky shut the door. “I was drinking a pet’s blood tonight.”

Amber pouted, which drew her gaunt cheeks into deeper concave divots and cast her lower face in faint shadows. “You don’t need to lie to me, Vicky. I won’t ask you to defy your nature for my sake.”

Vicky tried to look indignant as she moved to kneel in front of Amber, but telling the lie was hard enough without adding fake anger to it. “No, Amber, it’s true. I met other vampires tonight, and they gave me dinner. They’ve got a

huge stable of pets all around the city, and..." Vicky held out the grocery bags. "Here, I brought you something to snack on before we drop for the day."

Amber watched Vicky's face with a timidly hopeful expression. She wanted to believe Vicky, even if she still couldn't. "Can I meet them?"

"Sure, you can meet at least one of them tomorrow night, since I invited him here. Emil is the coven leader, and he's offering us a chance to move in with him."

"Us?" Amber's face filled with surprise. "He's okay with a human hanging around?"

Vicky shook her head. "You're not really a full-blooded human. I explained to him about what you really are, and he wants to protect you too."

"So let the other shoe drop already," Amber said.

She was reaching into the bag for a package of sandwiches, and Vicky wanted her to eat. It tortured Vicky to see Amber getting so dreadfully thin, and the idea of losing her scared Vicky worse than the thought of dying herself.

"There's another female there, and she's pregnant. You might want to steer clear of Claudia while she's in a mood swing or a feeding frenzy, but the rest of the coven should be safe." Vicky hoped she sounded convincing enough, and she had to suppress a relieved sigh when Amber nodded and opened the plastic wrapper to pull out a tuna sandwich halve.

She remained kneeling in front of Amber while she ate, and by then, the sun was casting a thin slant of light through the

gap between the closed drapes.

Vicky was tired, and she longed to crank the air conditioner and crawl under the pile of comforters on her bed. She wanted to sleep, but she couldn't, not until she knew Amber would be sleeping too.

She thought of Emil's words again. *When I say you love Amber, your heart bursts into a drumroll.* Just recalling his observation made her heart speed up again, and despite his assurances, she still felt stupid for letting herself fall for Amber. There was no way the relationship could work, with them constantly being at odds with each other.

Amber broke Vicky out of her thoughts when she sighed and set down the empty pint-sized milk carton. "Will we have time to go out for dinner before this leader shows up?"

"Maybe we should just order pizza." Vicky started to clean up the mess while Amber undressed for bed.

"Yeah, that works for me." Amber crawled under the covers, then smiled at Vicky. "And you're sure no one there will want to snack on me?"

"Uh..." Vicky dropped the trash into the bin and crossed the room to the other bed. "Well, they would want to sample you, given how rare you are. But I don't think any of them would try without your permission."

Amber watched her with a look of obvious skepticism. "How can you be so sure?"

Vicky stepped out of her boots while she talked. "These vampires are respectful of family law, and..." She paused to lean

over and peel off her jeans, and then she said, “Let me preface this by saying that I don’t think of you as property. But because of our relationship, other vampires will think of you as my pet.”

“I see.” Amber yawned and cradled her head on her folded arm. “So, me being your pet is enough to keep me safe.”

“It is with this coven, yes. Then again, with you being part halfling, none of them would kill you. You’re considered honorary fourth cousins, or something like that.” Amber’s soft laugh was music to Vicky’s ears, and she didn’t want to spoil the mood. But she couldn’t stop talking. “But listen, Amber. They are vampires, so they might do things you won’t approve of. If we want to live there without problems, you need to keep your tongue under control.”

“I can be good, really. Besides, they have volunteers, so they don’t hunt, right?” Vicky didn’t answer, and Amber raised her head, leaning it sideways against her shoulder while her frown returned. “Right?”

“Um...” Vicky groaned when Amber rolled away from her. She walked to the other side of Amber’s bed, passing through the beam of sunlight. She moved slowly, resisting the urge to hiss from the heat passing over her skin.

Of course sunlight wasn’t fatal for her, but it was painful, and she hoped Amber saw her pass through it. Then maybe she would understand how willing Vicky was to suffer for her.

But Amber rolled the other way again.

Vicky dropped onto the bed and grabbed Amber’s arm. “Amber, listen.”

Amber slung her arm back, and then she rolled onto her stomach in an attempt to pull herself free. “Let go of me.”

“No, just look at me and—” Amber still fought with her. “Amber, look at me.” Vicky rolled Amber onto her back, pinning her wrists above her head. Vicky settled her weight on Amber’s side to pin the much shorter woman.

Amber quit struggling, but Vicky almost couldn’t bear to watch the smoldering anger in her soft brown eyes. “Amber, please, can’t you try to understand me? I’m not human, all right? I can’t just pop by the store and pick up meat that someone else killed.”

“I know,” Amber whispered.

“Just—I need this. I need these people.”

“Why?”

“Because...because they can get me pregnant too.” Vicky was surprised she could admit the truth, but once she had, the light of understanding flickered in Amber’s eyes. Her indignant pout faded, until Vicky said, “Maybe I can even take a partner and—”

“Then you’ll forget about me,” Amber whimpered.

“No.” Vicky let go of Amber’s wrists, her hand moving down to rest on Amber’s cheek. “Please, don’t think you’re so unimportant to me that I would just forget you over a man. I...” Vicky faltered, still unable to confess her feelings for Amber. “You’re important to me, okay?”

“I know,” Amber said again, her pout becoming concerned. “You’re hurting yourself now by laying in sunlight. Please, just go to bed, and we’ll—we’ll sort it out tomorrow.”

Vicky didn’t want to leave. She got under the covers

beside Amber and laid on her side. Amber rolled onto her side, and they stared at each other through half-lidded eyes, both of them caught in the grips of fatigue.

Vicky closed her eyes and thought, *First, it was William, and then Ellen. Now I've fallen in love with Amber too. So why is it always the halflings that I can't walk away from?*

Chapter 2

1937

Glasgow, Scotland

Victoria stepped off the train and onto the platform, keeping her head low while she walked past the rest of the disembarking passengers. She was excited about finally being in Glasgow.

The temptation was strong to gawk like a tourist, but there were too many people around, and most of the Europeans still held onto their old superstitions. It would be safer for her to get away from people before she could allow herself to look around. Her first view of the station was only of the tiles below her feet.

She wore pancake makeup that made her appear more human, but she had to be careful not to move her head too much and wipe her “skin” on her collar. Gloves covered her hands, sleeves hid her arms, and a white bonnet cap held her hair to prevent it from glimmering with blue highlights.

A casual observer would look at her modest clothing and think she was fervently religious for how much she hid of her body. But then she wasn’t much to look at with all the dieting she’d been forced to endure on her journey.

Victoria arrived in Glasgow with nothing beyond her one traveling bag. It carried her spare clothes, her makeup, and a flick-knife, her primary method of venting her victims.

She'd owned nothing else for close to two years, when a mob in New York burned down the building she lived in. It was ironic, because the mob was rioting over a lack of work, and not one of the men knew that they were destroying the home of a vampire.

She'd lost everything in the fire. Her clothes and jewelry were gone, as were the books of vampire lore that she'd been given by her father, Otis. She'd lost the stack of funds she kept hidden in a hatbox in her closet. But the loss that stung most was the only photo she had of her parents. It was the only photo they'd allowed her to take, and it had come to mean everything to Victoria once they'd abandoned her.

Victoria had never seen another of her people after her parents left, and her sense of isolation led her to speak to the photo frequently. She would imagine what her mother and father would say, and in that way, she kept a connection to them, even if she never saw them in person again.

But the photo was reduced to ash, along with everything else in Victoria's life. Having nothing to keep her tied to New York, she chose to visit Europe, with her final destination being Glasgow, the city where her father was born well over five hundred years before.

The voyage on the cruise ship had been the hardest part of her journey. First Victoria made a torturous daylight trip to the Manhattan cruise terminal, and then she starved herself for the full week and a half long trip. By the time she'd arrived in Dover, many of the passengers were looking mighty tasty.

But she held out until later in the night, when she tracked down a trio of brigands. She took a flick-knife from one man, using it to slit all three men's throats before she drained them. The cash they carried helped to pay for her train tickets, and only after she'd expended her funds did she go hunting again.

For two years, she wandered. She'd first drifted in a meandering path through Ireland, spending four months in the country before she took a much shorter ferry trip to England. Taking meals was hard with the frequency of the police patrols in most British cities, and so she'd spent less than two months there before she took a ship to the Netherlands.

There, meals were much easier to find, with the country boasting a vast array of nightlife activities to draw out both locals and tourists. Victoria kept herself on a strict diet to avoid drawing attention to herself, but when she needed to eat, there was always food available.

Keeping fed wasn't what enchanted her. On many nights, Victoria had ventured into human clubs and bars to listen to music. Complete strangers would approach her to strike up conversations, and between the music and the company, she was able to forget how lonely she was.

Victoria had spent the longest amount of her time exploring every city in the Netherlands. But eventually her destinations merged into one long blur of dark streets, and the visits to the clubs became bitter opportunities to watch human couples flirt with each other. Then she could remind herself once again that she had no one.

Finally, she'd grown tired of exploring, and she booked passage to Scotland.

At the end of her journey, Victoria had plans to make a new home for herself. She could put her life back together after her long, wandering journey. But first, she had to take care of her stomach. She'd skipped far too many meals to avoid creating a trail, and her first goal upon leaving the train station was to find something to eat.

Victoria made it outside the station without catching anyone's attention, or so she thought. Once she was on the street, the wind moved at her back, and it alerted her to a man behind her. He had an odd scent, one which was vaguely human. But there was an exotic mixture of pheromones coming off of the man that suggested he was something else.

She had a memory of her mother, Florence, warning her about people with strange scents. Florence had said, *Trust your nose, Victoria. If they don't smell fully human, it's safer to avoid them.*

Victoria wanted to heed the advice, and she walked for several blocks, taking random turns to try and shake the man. She checked the display window of a dress shop, pausing to turn her head. The man stopped walking, and he also tried to feign interest in something in a shop window.

Victoria got nervous, and she took a few steps before an accented male voice spoke inside her head. *You don't need to fear me.*

Victoria stopped walking and turned around to stare at the man with a look of confusion. *Did you just project a thought at me?*

The man smiled warmly as he approached Victoria, his silver eyes glinting in the lamplights lining the side of the cobblestone street. *Indeed I did, milady*, he sent.

He was dressed a grey tailored coat which was well-worn, though not threadbare by any means. The same was true of his loose black pants, and of the grey-checked knit cap he wore over his curly, auburn hair. When he moved between the circles of light cast by the lamps, his face fell heavy with shadow under the brim of the cap.

He stopped in front of her and drew his hands out of his pockets, leaning over in a bow as he took Victoria's hand and pecked a kiss on it. "I'm charmed to meet you, Victoria. My name is William McCullough."

Victoria drew her hand back. "How did you know my name?"

"I'm a halfling. I can read your thoughts as easily as you could smell me from four blocks away."

"I know what a halfling is," Victoria said.

"And I know what you are too, vampire." William raised his hands in a calming gesture when Vicky took a step back. "Relax, child. I mean you no harm."

His accent was odd; not quite Scottish, not quite Irish, and yet, not quite English either.

He nodded at her assessment and said, "Like you, I suffer from wanderlust, and my accent has changed over the years." William leaned his head over as he listened to her thoughts. "You must be starving after such a long trip. We should find you

something to eat.” The right corner of his mouth ticked up in the tiniest of smirks. “Or, perhaps someone?”

Though Victoria didn't know her true age, she was nineteen, and she was not yet full of self-confidence about herself. Having William give voice to her thoughts upset her, and she took another step back to get some space between her and him.

William took a step back as well, and then he reached around his back.

Victoria tensed at the quiet hiss of a knife blade sliding free from a leather sheath. She was starting to backpedal when William brought the knife up and slashed his other hand. The blade was razor keen, and though he'd barely whipped the knife over his skin, a wide slit unfolded in his palm. His hand filled with blood, and a thin trickle spilled over the folded crease of skin under his pinky.

Victoria stopped, her gaze frozen on the overflowing blood.

William put away the knife, never grimacing as he offered out his wounded hand. Then he waved to her with the other. Both his warm smile and the inviting gesture made him look like he was trying to attract a stray animal with an offering of food.

Victoria bristled with anger, thinking to drain the halfling through the wound he'd given himself. He laughed at her, and a moment later, she realized why. The cut would never bleed out, and in order to drain him, she needed to go for a vein.

She found herself stepping toward William, her hunger moving her legs just as much as her curiosity. She thought, *What do halflings taste like?*

William's blood pooled in his cupped palm, but the wound was already reduced to a weak flow, allowing her only a few sips.

To Victoria's delight, she found him free of vices. There was no taint of nicotine, nor of alcohol. He carried no diseases, making his blood so clean that Victoria could almost believe he was a virgin.

His blood still held the coppery taste of human, but there was something else, a strong taste like iron on the back of her palate. There was also an oddly sweet odor to his blood, and the odor translated to a flavor on the sides of her tongue.

"That little sip won't hold you for long." William drew a handkerchief from his coat to wrap around his hand and staunch the cut. "Come with me, and I'll find you someone to feast upon." He took her hand, and Victoria didn't know why, but she followed him willingly, eagerly even.

When they passed under the next streetlamp, she appraised his smooth, angular face, noting that he was almost as pale as she was. He had a hawkish nose, lean cheeks and a flaring, round jaw line. His silver eyes had changed to a bright emerald green, and with his curly hair drifting down over them, he looked roguishly handsome.

Or, he would have if his cheeks carried even the slightest signs of stubble. Victoria wondered if touching his face would be

like running her fingers over silk. His chin and lip bore only faint wisps of hair, and in her estimation, he was boyishly handsome. She had no idea of how old he was, but she had to guess he was at least in his forties, because he'd called her a child.

She was distracted from the thought when she caught scent of a drunken man who staggered out of a pub. Only then did she look around and realize how far they had walked. She'd had the impression of looking at William briefly as they passed under one light, but when she glanced back over her shoulder, none of the darkened brick buildings were familiar.

Even the cobblestone street was different. It was narrower, and she guessed that William must have guided her away from the main thoroughfares. The change of scenery was so jarring, because she'd had no sense of time moving when she watched William.

William clasped her upper arm, urging her to quicken her pace, and they fell into step behind the drunk, following him for several blocks. There was no one else on the street, and Victoria glanced at William to ask what they were waiting for. Her voice caught in her throat when she saw that his eyes were silver again.

What stunned her wasn't the shift in color. She noticed how the patterns of his irises constantly moved. Victoria knew very little about halflings aside from the lore she'd learned from her parents. But she knew halflings were telepathic, and she could guess that his eyes being silver meant he was using his powers.

Still, Victoria had no clue that William had compelled the man to leave the pub, nor did she know that he had mesmerized her while she fed from him.

The reasons for his selection were also a mystery to her, but William chose the hulking brute because he was an ex-con. The brigand had been planning the murder of another, much wealthier patron of the pub when William scanned his thoughts. Both his large size and his murderous thoughts made him the perfect target, in William's opinion.

The drunk wandered into a darkened alleyway. William stopped walking, and he offered Victoria a bow. "I shall wait here."

Victoria peered down the alley. Her gaze locked on the man, who leaned against one wall for support. She asked, "Then what happens?"

"Then I'll take you someplace safe to sleep for the day," William said.

Victoria nodded, and she opened her bag to take out her knife. She handed William the bag and said, "I'll be right back."

William laughed quietly. "Take your time, Vicky."

The pet name would quickly become the only name she answered to.

Chapter 3

Friday, July 18, 1997

Amber was just finishing her dinner when someone knocked on the door. The heavy scent of the pizza masked Emil's arrival, and Vicky offered him an awkward smile as she stepped back from the door. "Sorry, we're not ready to go yet."

"Which one of you is really the pet here?" Emil grinned and waved a hand as he walked inside. "Don't worry, I can wait for..." His gaze flicked over to Amber, and his smile fell into a concerned frown. "She looks ill."

"Amber hasn't been eating properly these days," Vicky said. She couldn't resist giving Amber a stern glare, a subtle warning for Amber, *Be good*. "Amber, this is Emil."

Amber wiped her fingers on a napkin and got up, moving to offer her hand. "Hello, nice to—"

Emil turned her hand to expose her wrist as he leaned over. He inhaled deeply, and said, "Oh, that's...very interesting." He released her hand and straightened up, offering her a smile which didn't show off his fangs.

Amber knew he was trying to be civil, and she returned the smile. "What is?"

"Your scent. It's almost human, but you've got just enough halfling to make you different." Emil moved to sit down in the chair beside Amber's, then waved at her plate. "Please,

finish eating. None of us will be going hungry tonight, so there's no reason you should either."

Amber returned to her seat, chewing a mouthful of pizza before she said, "Vicky says you consider me a pet."

"No, not me," Emil objected with good humor in his voice. "Vicky tried to lie and claim that to make things easier for me to understand. But I saw her eyes when she talked about you, and I've been around long enough to know what a vampire looks like when she's in love."

Amber glanced over at Vicky, whose muddled expression said a lot more than she had in months. Vicky looked frustrated at Emil for confessing her feelings to Amber, but she was also embarrassed under Amber's intent gaze. The two emotions fought for space on her face, with neither able to claim victory.

Amber smiled at Emil and asked, "Did she say it to you? Because every time I say I love her, she brushes me off."

Emil laughed easily. "Amber, vampires have a hard time expressing any emotions besides joy and anger. Everything else confuses the animal inside us, and that animal nature makes us thickheaded."

Amber couldn't help but laugh, and she set down the rest of her pizza. "If I didn't know better, I'd swear you just insulted her."

"Maybe I did, but it's just harmless ribbing." Emil's smile fell, and he raised his head to stare at Vicky. "What did you want from our coven?" Before Vicky could answer, he added, "Be honest, please."

"I...I want a child." Vicky stared at Emil with a worried frown. "Did you follow me last night?"

"No, I bugged your jacket just before you left." Emil offered a tired smirk at her sudden angry expression. "I do what I can to keep my people safe. You seem nice enough, but you're still a whelp who's used to causing trouble and having your way." The smirk faded, and he shook his head. "Vicky, I'm sorry, but there's no easy way to say this. I can't help you have a child, because you're sterile."

"I'm..." Vicky sat down in the middle of the floor, thumping down hard on her tailbone. She barely felt it. Her senses just unplugged on her, and she was unconscious with her eyes wide open.

Amber stared at Vicky, her appetite gone. It was replaced by nausea, and the feeling was made stronger by the lump rising in her throat.

She couldn't look away from Vicky's slackened face as she asked, "How can you be so sure?"

"Her hormone levels are low, and her scent..." Emil made a weak shrug. "It isn't fertile, you see?"

"I guess," Amber murmured.

"Vicky told me she was shot in the abdomen, and I think one of the bullets might have been responsible for rendering her sterile."

"But...but, shouldn't she heal from that?" Amber asked.

Emil shook his head. "There's two kinds of tissues we can't regenerate. I'm sure you can guess which two."

“I don’t want to play guessing—” Amber started to object until she realized that she already knew. She said, “The brain and reproductive organs.”

“Yes. Everything else is just meat that we can heal. But if the bullets struck her ovary, that would be permanent.”

“Vampires only have one?” Amber asked.

“Yes.” Emil glanced at Vicky, who still hadn’t moved. “I don’t know where the shots went, so I’m only guessing.”

Vicky raised her hand to point low on her stomach. “Entry,” she said before she moved her hand around her back and drew a circle. “Exit.”

She repeated the display twice more. Emil couldn’t see where she pointed on her back, but he grimaced at the large areas that must have been blown out of Vicky if her arm movements were accurate. “I’m truly sorry, Vicky. I still would like to invite you to stay with my coven, and Amber will be welcome in our home. You have my word that she’ll be treated as one of our own, if she can behave.”

“I can, really,” Amber promised. “I’ll be good, so long as nobody refers to me in snacking terms.”

Emil smirked, barely a second passing before he said, “I’ll keep that in mind, honey.”

Amber rode Emil’s back during the trip, and though he ran slower to match Vicky’s shorter stride, his pace was still much faster than Amber had ever moved in a car. She needed to bury

her face in Emil's shoulder for most of the trip to keep her hair from whipping into her eyes and blinding her.

But she did look up once, and everything around her had become too blurry to make out any details clearly. Amber started to say something, and then she ate a mouthful of hair, only half of which was hers. Emil laughed at her, and she didn't bother looking up again.

When the vampires stopped at the front door, their hair settled back into place without assistance. Their hair was straight and neat, while Amber's head looked like a storm of stray blue-black strands that stuck out at all kinds of odd angles.

Amber resorted to licking her palms to slick down the strays, which caused Emil to snicker. He said, "I guess she's the pet after all."

Vicky and Amber were separated almost from the moment they arrived at the house. Introductions were made, and Claudia took hold of Amber's arm at a look from Emil. While Emil guided Vicky to the kitchen, Amber toured the house with Claudia acting as her guide.

The first thing that Amber had to get used to was the dim lighting. Every bulb used was low wattage, and even with overhead lights and many lamps on, the rooms were deep with shadows.

Most of the furniture in the rooms were antique, and Amber had the feeling that she might end up voluntarily sitting on the floor instead of dirtying the pristine chairs and couches in every room.

The dining room was a joke, and Amber didn't need to have it explained. Claudia waved and said, "The dining room," and Amber giggled before asking, "How do you get rid of the bloodstains?"

There was a layer of dust on the table, as though no one had even been through for maintenance of the room in a few months.

There was a living room and a den, both of them looking similar except for the additions of a fireplace and several rows of bookshelves in the den. Both rooms had a similar grandfather clock. The same style of couch was in the living room, right down to the same shade of stained wood on the arms and back.

There were matching divans in both rooms, though the divan in the den looked like it was actually used, while the one in the living room was in showroom condition.

In neither room could a TV be found. In the den, a slim CD stereo system sat above the mantle of the fireplace, and beside it was a row of classical music CDs.

Amber could almost imagine Claudia lounging over the divan in the den with a book in her hand while she listened to Beethoven. The scene in her head was so domestic and tranquil, yet Claudia looked perfectly at home in the mundane fantasy. The same vision seemed comical if she tried to replace Claudia with Vicky, who was anything but a homebody.

The tour continued upstairs with the bedrooms, and each room differed according to the owner's preference.

Emil's room was the most elaborately furnished with

antique furniture. He had a massive four post bed and a vanity which obviously served him as a writing desk, given how many notepads were stacked neatly on the surface. A pen and open notepad were set in front of the antique baroque-style chair. The vanity was complimented by the dark wardrobe on the other side of the room, and the far wall was filled by a massive painting of a mountain range. Under the painting was an antique padded chair and an ottoman, both covered in red velvet, and beside them was an end table stacked with four cloth-bound books.

The rest of the vampires chose to go with more modern furnishing. In particular, the room Claudia shared with Charles seemed the most lived in. Clothes were piled in a plastic basket in the corner of the room, and instead of a wardrobe, two darkly stained modern dressers sat on either side of a black lacquer vanity. The poster above the bed was tacked to the wall unframed, a print of an Olivia painting, *The Invitation*.

On the back of the vanity behind Amber, the lower portion of the mirror was obscured by a CD stereo and a stack of CDs. At a glance, Amber recognized a few of the bands. Claudia and Charles had modern tastes in music, and their room reflected a modern laziness that couldn't be found in Emil's immaculate room. Their bed was an extended double instead of the king-size Emil preferred, and the covers were arranged to look halfway made.

The room Claudia and Charles shared reminded Amber of the bedroom that she'd shared with Marcus. In this way, the room felt comforting to her, and it helped Amber identify with

Claudia as a person, rather than as a vampire.

No one slept in coffins, but then Vicky had only done so based on her morbidly sarcastic nature. Vicky had given up the coffin in Tucson to travel light, and though Amber knew vampires didn't need coffins, she still felt guilty over taking something else away from Vicky.

She barely saw the furnishings of Lucas' bedroom, and she nodded randomly while Claudia finished the tour in a guest room.

Her gaze kept wandering back to Claudia's stomach. *Vicky lost so much more than a coffin*, Amber thought. *Because of me, she'll never have kids.*

"Do you eat babies?" Claudia asked suddenly.

"Huh?" Amber asked, still lost in her thoughts.

"I'm not due for a few more months, but this kid isn't going on the menu." Claudia smiled while her expression became sympathetic. "You've got something on your mind, little mage." She moved to the bed and sat down, patting the covers beside her. "Come sit down, and tell auntie Claudia all about it."

Amber hesitated, and then she moved to the bed and sat down. She wasn't sure what she was thinking, and she couldn't form words at first.

"Do I intimidate you?" Claudia asked.

"Maybe a little bit, yeah." Amber tried to fake a thin smile and failed. Her eyes filled with a look of anxiety, and her voice was thick when she said, "I guess you already know that Vicky is sterile."

“Yes.”

“Well, that’s my fault.” Amber started to talk about how her involvement with Wendy led to Vicky being grievously wounded, and by the time she finished, she was talking in a warbling voice between hitching sobs.

Claudia slipped a cool, slender arm around her shoulders to pull her into a hug. Amber tried to keep herself together, but the guilt was tearing her apart at the seams. Vicky wouldn’t let Amber speak about her feelings anymore, because she was willing to take equal blame for agreeing to help Wendy.

But Amber wouldn’t let Vicky take the burden away. She clung to her guilt stubbornly, unable to share the load with anyone. The weight of her regrets were heavy before, when all she thought Vicky had lost was her home, her job, and everything she owned. Even her beloved monster truck had to be sold to a chop-shop to ensure a clean escape with no trails left behind.

But knowing that she had taken away Vicky’s ability to have a child, Amber felt lower than a murderer.

She blubbered her feelings out to Claudia, who said nothing. Claudia offered only the comfort of her presence, acting as a sounding board to let Amber vent.

When Amber quieted into sniffles, Claudia stood up and said, “This is your room. If you wait here, I’ll be back soon with fresh bed clothes. Those are going to be dusty.” She waved toward the door and backed up. “I just need to talk to Emil and the others for a few minutes, all right?”

Vicky sat in the den, waiting for Emil to return. Claudia had called him away, claiming that she wanted to discuss something in private upstairs.

That was half an hour ago, according to the antique grandfather clock sandwiched between two massive bookshelves on the far side of the room. She looked around the den, her gaze falling again on the empty fireplace. She wondered if it had ever been used by anyone in the house.

The Bach CD looped to start from the beginning, and Vicky got up to wander up the hallway to the stairs. She was surprised when she found Amber hunched over to peer through the keyhole into Emil's bedroom. Vicky crossed the wide corridor swiftly, intending to pull Amber away.

But Emil growled angrily, and shouted, "Absolutely not!"

Vicky froze and held her breath.

"Emil, you don't understand," Claudia said, her voice much lower. "This would help both of them."

"Do you really think the halfling is going to endure such an ordeal?"

Vicky stepped closer to the door, drawn in by the mixture of anger and concern in Emil's voice. Amber glanced back nervously, almost thumping into the door when she realized Vicky was behind her. She straightened up, and a silent conversation took place between them.

Vicky narrowed her eyes and frowned. *What's going on?*

Amber pointed at the door while her expression became muddled. *Ask them.*

Then Claudia said, "I know Amber would. It's obvious how much she cares for Vicky, but they're both driving each other away because of the guilt they feel for their failures. I listened to that girl crying, and I know she'll be hurting for a long time over Vicky being sterile."

Vicky almost dropped to the floor again. The word was still too much like a physical punch that sucked the wind out of her chest and drained the strength from her legs.

But she couldn't give in to the shock, because then all of the pieces of the puzzle were fitting together in her mind. The last tile dropped into place when Emil said, "But what you're suggesting could kill Amber."

Strength returned to Vicky's legs, and she strode to the door, moving Amber to one side before she shouldered it open forcefully. Everyone in the room jolted as the door thumped on Vicky's shoulder, and heads were spinning toward Vicky when the knob cracked and embedded into the wall.

She ignored Emil's look of annoyance, putting her hands on her hips while she glared at Claudia. "What the hell do you think you're doing, bitch?"

Claudia's mouth flapped while she tried to sputter a quick explanation. An instant later, Charles and Lucas were standing on either side of Claudia, their eyes narrowed as they glared at Vicky.

Emil was faster to recover. “Claudia was suggesting that I should let Charles or Lucas mate with Amber.”

Vicky clenched her jaw, angry that she’d guessed exactly right. “What the hell? We’re not even here less than an hour, and you’re looking for a way to kill her?”

“Vicky, she’s got enough halfling blood in her that it might work,” Claudia said. “She could—”

“The baby would kill her and itself by the first trimester!” Vicky shouted, cutting her off. She clenched her fists, taking a deep breath as she tried to dispel her rage.

But she had a stray thought, and the emotion boiled hotter in her chest instead of simmering. “Come to think of it, she’ll die when her partner goes into a bloodlust. Did you think about this at all before you suggested something so stupid?”

Claudia sighed. “I did, and if you’ll both calm down, I can explain. Amber can carry the child full term, but she’ll need to become a blood drinker for the full eighteen months. If she’s able to stay here, I can handle the nursing duties after the child is born, and Amber will be free to go off the bottle. As for the bloodlust, you’ll be in the room, and you’ll offer a limb to whichever male she picks, allowing him to feed from you while he impregnates your partner.”

Vicky shook her head. “She’s not my—”

“She is, and you should just admit it,” Claudia snapped. “You wouldn’t show this much concern for a pet, so stop playing dumb.” Her gaze wandered to the door, and she raised her hand to wave Amber inside. “You’ve been listening all this time, so

you know what I'm proposing is slightly dangerous."

Emil snorted and rolled his eyes. "Slightly."

"If you don't have enough halfling genes to pull this off, then all this will be for you is sex...brutal sex."

Amber looked at Vicky, who was already shaking her head. Amber smiled weakly. "Gee, that's one hell of a sales pitch, isn't it?"

Vicky pleaded, "Amber, think about—"

"Emil, can I choose you?" Amber asked.

Emil's face flattened in a slack look of shock, and he stared for several long seconds before he asked, "Why me?"

"You're the oldest, so you'll know how to take your time," Amber said.

Claudia tittered, and Emil stared blankly for another second before he laughed as well. Lucas and Charles joined in, and the only person not laughing was Vicky.

Vicky felt like she'd just stepped through a portal into Heil, and the fires of the rift were snapping shut behind her.

Chapter 4

Suaturday, July 19, 1997

Vicky rolled her head over on her pillow to look at the door as it creaked open. Amber stood in the doorway, dressed in a black T-shirt that must have belonged to Charles. On him the shirt would have been tight fitting, but the bottom hung to Amber's knees, and the sleeves billowed just above her elbows.

Vicky wanted to be happy that Amber was coming to sleep with her, but she couldn't get rid of the scowl creasing her face.

Amber ignored her, closing the door to plunge the room into total darkness. She padded to the bed, uttering a whine when she clunked her shin against the wooden box frame. An angry growl rushed out of her chest, but it quickly turned into an annoyed laugh before she crawled onto the bed.

Vicky rolled onto her side to turn away from Amber, and the bed springs creaked until they both settled themselves.

A few seconds passed before Amber laid her hand on Vicky's back, just below her shoulder blade. Her other hand settled under the other shoulder blade, and she started to massage Vicky's back.

"Stop it," Vicky said.

"Don't be mad at me, please?" Amber kept massaging to work the knots out of Vicky's muscles. "We're already mad at each other so often now that we never talk anymore. We just fight."

“We fight because you won’t listen to me.” Vicky rolled over, taking hold of Amber’s hands to push them away. “Would you stop it?”

“I’m just trying to help,” Amber whined, her voice cracking as if she were on the verge of tears. “Talk to me, please. You’re the only thing I’ve got left, and now...”

Amber scooted closer, taking Vicky’s hand in both of hers. She drew it back and laid Vicky’s palm over her heart. Amber’s pulse was fluttering erratically from fear and anguish. Her emotions rolled off her skin as a mournful scent that in turn depressed Vicky and left her feeling hollow.

“Amber, what you’re planning...” A frustrated sigh burst from Vicky’s lips. “It’s not something that usually works out for the mother.”

“How do you know so much about it?”

“I told you before that I met a halfling in Scotland. He showed me some of his family’s past. There were experiments his family did to enhance their genetic stock.” Vicky was surprised by the heavy tear that spilled onto the bridge of her nose at the thought of William, and as she blinked, another tear dropped down her cheek to seep into the pillow. “The halflings gave up on mating with vampires before the inquisitions, because the only way for a mother to survive is to become a blood drinker.”

“I understood—”

“You don’t understand anything,” Vicky whispered angrily. “This isn’t a craving you can put off, and it isn’t a

voluntary addiction you can indulge in when you please. The life inside you will feed constantly, and you will either keep pace with their demands, or you will die.”

She heaved a long sigh. “No matter what you think you’re capable of, you’re still weak from starving yourself. This will put a huge strain on you, and you’ll always need to eat. I mean two victims’ worth per night, Amber.”

Silence filled the room. Amber rubbed the back of Vicky’s hand, urging her to keep talking. “You’re still not listening,” Vicky said.

“I am,” Amber insisted. “Tell me why it doesn’t work out for the mothers who carry a baby to full term.”

“The few women who survived were burned at the stake. They were killed along with their children, who were called abominations. The mothers who survived left a trail of bodies behind them so big, even an idiot could find them. So it wasn’t hard for them to be tracked down.”

“Okay, but I don’t have to hunt for victims, do I? There’s a whole refrigerator filled with blood, and an army of volunteers willing to feed me.” Amber moved closer again, bending her knee to touch Vicky’s thigh. “I’m listening to you, Vicky. Are you listening to me? Or do I not get to have an opinion because I’m just your pet?”

“You know that’s not how I think of you,” Vicky said.

“I don’t know anything. You won’t tell me how you feel.” Amber shifted on the bed, then raised her head to rest her cheek against Vicky’s.

The fear was gone from her scent, leaving behind only her natural aroma mixed with a faint trace of soap. Her hair was still damp from a shower, and the floral scent of conditioner added to the heady mixture.

Vicky breathed in and shuddered, her lips brushing over the side of Amber's throat. Her teeth ached, and she realized how easy it would be for her to end her problems with one bite.

But no, then she would be alone, and the guilt of killing Amber would be too much for her to bear. She suffered enough under the burden of guilt for screwing up their lives, and adding to the pile could crush the life from Vicky, even if she was supposedly immortal.

Vicky closed her arms around Amber, moving her head to bring her lips up to Amber's ear. "You're my partner, and I would give anything to keep you safe."

Amber nodded. "I love you, and I would give anything to see you happy again."

"How will this make me happy?" Vicky asked, her voice quivering with raw anguish. "You're putting yourself in too much risk, and it's not even my kid. It's yours."

"It can be ours, okay?" Amber kissed Vicky's cheek, a brush of skin against skin so soft, it felt like a butterfly's wing.

Vicky pushed Amber back, because the urge that came to her then had nothing to do with hunger. "All right, I'll go through with this, but please, give me some space. You're making me feel funny."

A soft rush of air escaped Amber in a snort. “Like ‘hmm funny,’ or ‘ha ha funny?’”

Vicky allowed herself a tiny smile. “Hmm funny, and since I had the impression that you were straight, I don’t think I should be thinking what I’m thinking.”

Silence. Vicky could feel Amber trembling, her chest tight while she tried to keep from laughing. Vicky asked, “You are straight, right?”

“Maaaaaybe,” Amber said and giggled coyly. “Would you like to find out?”

Vicky’s mouth went dry, and she swallowed so hard it made a sound. Which caused Amber to laugh even more. “Uh, maybe later.”

Chapter 5

1937

Glasgow, Scotland

Vicky hiccupped and then tittered as she leaned against William for support. “Why must you choose only the most blindly drunk victims in Glesca? Can’t you once find a teetotaler in the middle of the—” She hiccupped again, giggling before she added, “Oh, wait, I answered my own question. Never you mind then.”

William squeezed her in a gentle hug. “I love hearing you laugh. I could listen to that to my dying breath and still never be bored with it.”

Vicky blushed, an action that she was only capable of for a few hours after feeding. Even then, the color rose as a soft blue tint to her cheeks.

William convinced her to take the pancake makeup off. He told her that he preferred to see her “as God intended her,” a phrase which never failed to make her laugh.

He’d also convinced her to stop wearing the bonnet to hide her cascading blue-black hair, and though he could not break her of the habit of favoring black clothes, he at least convinced her to wear some “daring” sleeveless dresses.

Each night, William guided her through the city, always pulling her down random streets to avoid traffic or large crowds.

He used his powers to hunt down her victims, and always, it was some lowlife drunk who probably deserved a gruesome fate. Vicky used her knife each time, and she often left victims without draining them completely. Most were large, and she was well fed even if she didn't take full meals.

Besides, with many of the men having high alcohol levels in their blood, she couldn't finish them without passing out on top of her victims.

William never explained the methods for his selections, but after a few months, Vicky could guess what he was doing. It should have annoyed her that he was using her as a vigilante, but food was food to her, and she enjoyed his company. She liked living in his home, and if the price to stay was a restriction in her diet, she certainly didn't mind.

Once Vicky was fed, she and William returned to his loft apartment above his gallery, and he alternated between making sketches of Vicky or painting portraits.

William was smitten with Vicky, and he saw her as his perfect muse. None of the artwork he made of her went out for sale in his gallery. He vowed to hide her pictures to keep her safe. But he seemed to do so little other work after meeting her. He was always trying to pose her this way or that for new portraits, and he asked her to try on different costumes for each sitting.

The posing was easy enough. Vampires make natural models because they can hold perfectly still for hours, even days if they are properly motivated and out of direct sunlight.

However, the costumes offended her. The problem was the genetic preference that every vampire had for black clothing. Vicky wore dresses of blue and red for him, and she did not burst into flames. Although, she had broken out in a nasty purple rash from one of the dresses. She suspected that was an allergy to the dye.

Vicky suffered through every sitting in the colorful clothes, because William talked while he worked, and he never ran out of fascinating things to say. He read her parts of the conversation from her mind, allowing her to ask questions without moving.

William was right. She was the perfect muse.

Or, rather, she usually was.

Vicky was so drunk that night, she couldn't stand straight. William let her crumple over onto a gilded divan set near the front window of his loft, and then he set up his easel and his supplies.

His painting was mostly accurate, though in his rendition, late morning sunlight spilled through the window. The light filled Vicky's skin with a warm golden hue, and he painted her hair more in tones of bright cobalt than of black.

William liked envisioning how she would look under direct sunlight, and his imagination had conjured up countless versions of her lying or dancing in fields under a brilliant midday sun.

Vicky rolled her head to look at William, laughing when his face grimaced into an annoyed scowl. *Why don't you try a nude portrait?*

“I couldn’t.” William’s smile returned, though it was more mischievous than before. “The temptation to join you on the divan would be too much for me, and I’m supposed to stay on this side of the canvas.”

Vicky laughed and raised her hand to find the zipper of her dress. *I wish I’d known that sooner.*

William sighed, though his smile had begun to warm his entire face. “What are you doing?”

Vicky slid the zipper down and pulled off the shoulder strap to expose her chest. She said, “I’m trying to tempt you.”

His reaction wasn’t what she expected. He started to laugh, covering his mouth while his eyes filled with a look of apology. He was able to get himself under control, and he said, “I didn’t realize they would be blue.”

Vicky knew he was lying, and that he was trying to distract her. She glanced down at her nipples, and then she smirked at him. “My lips are blue, so what other color should my nipples be?”

“So...you’re pale blue everywhere, then?”

An electric thrill raced up her spine. Was he going to accept her? But no, she could tell from his eyes that he was only flirting again. It was just how halfings were.

She made one last effort, saying, “Yer welcome to look and see fer yerself, laddie.”

William laughed at her almost passable attempt at a Scottish accent. “No, I really can’t, Vicky. It’s against the law.”

Vicky laughed, tilting her head over the back of the

divan. “Against whose law? I thought you walked away from your family and their silly laws.”

“I walked away from them, sure.” William’s smile softened before he shook his head. “But not all of their laws were made for silly reasons.”

Curiosity stumbled into Vicky’s mental fantasy and splashed a bucket of cold water on her inhibitions. “You mean to say halflings used to have a problem mating with too many vampires?”

“Well, no, not quite. The family made some long term experiments. It’s really going to be easier if I just show you. May I?”

Vicky nodded, and his eyes flashed to silver. Vicky’s cheeks warmed in a blush, and then her mind was flooded with ancient memories. Raising her hand to the side of her head, Vicky closed her eyes. Then every experience was more vivid, because all of her senses were attuned to William’s psychic history lesson.

First, he gave her the memories of the halfling leaders who watched over the earliest experiments. Through their eyes, she saw halfling women drop dead within days of becoming pregnant. Their bodies had shriveled up as the fetuses consumed every last drop of blood and starved to death.

Vicky was sent into the minds of the surviving halfling mothers, who had fed like vampires in a bloodlust to sustain themselves. They had kept their babies alive for the full term, only to die at the stake days after giving birth.

Despite the pain she felt during the final moments of each mother, Vicky kept her eyes closed. Tears squeezed from the corners of her eyes and streamed down her cheeks, and her shoulders shook with every hitching breath that she gasped.

But she stayed locked inside the visions. If it was important to William that she know the truth, then she would endure whatever he gave her.

Vicky saw the memories of vampire mothers next, and the results were just as terrible for them. The vampires were driven into bloodlusts so fierce that they attacked everything coming near them. All were put down before they could carry their children to full term.

William returned to the thoughts of the leader who had concluded the experiments. That leader had enacted a permanent ban on sexual relations between halflings and vampires.

Vicky sat still, her lower lip trembling while she let her mind loop through the memories again. She had never considered herself a sheltered child. But at that moment, Vicky learned that there were horrors in the world, and they were called children.

Chapter 6

Saturday, July 19, 1997

Looking up from the newspaper, Emil nodded a greeting to Vicky as she walked into the kitchen. He set aside his half full glass and asked, "What's the verdict?"

"I'm in," Vicky said, still walking to the refrigerator. "I do hope you're a civilized vampire."

"What do you mean?" Emil asked.

Vicky opened the freezer and nodded when she found a box filled with rolls of red tinted gauze pads. "I'll be your sex slave forever if you can tell me where the kettle is."

"It's in the cabinet above the stove, and please add enough water for me." Emil rocked his seat onto the back legs, using the point of his toe under the table to balance himself. "Are you sure you're okay with this? Setting aside the obvious dangers, I've noticed you're very...possessive about your partner."

Vicky laughed as she leaned over the sink to fill the kettle. She didn't bother arguing over Emil's choice of words to describe Amber, because, by then, none of the coven would have believed that Amber was just a pet.

Vicky asked, "You think I'll try to take your head off?"

"The thought did occur to me, yes." Emil folded his arms and made a disdainful snort. "Besides, at my age, I feel like a pervert for playing with anything as young as Amber."

“You could pass the job off to—”

“No, Amber will want me, and her choice makes sense. I can probably do this without going into a full bloodlust, and it would be a lot less brutal than turning her over to one of the boys.”

Vicky closed her mouth on a snarky comment and nodded her agreement. But the next comment that came to mind was too good to resist. “We’ll try not to call you grampa in bed.”

Emil feigned an indignant scowl. “You are still young enough to spank according to vampire law, you know.”

Vicky laughed and wiggled her ass. “It’s no good, gramps. I already like it too much.”

Amber lay in the bathtub, her face the only part of her body not submerged under the water. She listened to her heart beating, and her pulse sounded measured and relaxed. Her chest whooshed in a slow pace as she breathed, in and out, in and out.

The heat lamp was on, and the low-watt lights above the sink mirror were off, bathing the white tiles in an intense red color.

If she closed her eyes, she could almost imagine that she was inside a womb.

Amber inhaled, held her breath, and sank her head back, forcing herself to keep her eyes open under the water. The ceiling warped and swirled above her, the details lost in the surface refractions until she forced herself to be still.

Amber was scared, but she couldn't admit it without being questioned on whether she was sure about her choice. She was, but it didn't make her fear any less keen. The blade of fear sliced down her back, numbing her body and drawing strength from her limbs like blood rushing from open wounds.

Amber thought, *I got punted into a van by a daemon. How bad could sex with a vampire be?*

Levity wasn't helping. Beyond the deed itself, there was eighteen months of pregnancy. Eighteen. Eight-fucking-teen. As in two human pregnancies back to back. She didn't want to think of how long labor might take.

Yet she was committed already to eighteen months of feeding on blood to keep herself and her child alive. That was one and a half years of being the monster she feared so much. She loved Vicky as a person. She was bound to Vicky as a partner, and she truly would do anything to make Vicky happy. But Amber felt a bone chilling fear when she thought of how Vicky sustained herself.

She was frightened by the other vampires in the coven, even if none of them were a threat to her. Claudia gave up hunting during her pregnancy, but she would most assuredly return to it once her child was born. The others still patrolled on occasion, and it didn't matter to them if they killed good people or bad. It was all just food to them.

But I don't have to hunt, Amber reminded herself as she raised her head and exhaled. *I can drink from willing volunteers and stay at home with Claudia. She's having an easy time with her pregnancy,*

because she's protected by the coven. So, so long as I don't piss Emil off, I'm welcome to stay and drink as much free blood as I want.

Amber grimaced before adding, *Great.*

She raised her head to rest it on the back of the tub. Taking deep breaths to calm herself, she thought, *This isn't just for Vicky, anyway. I'm about to turn twenty-five, and it's not like Marcus and I had the best of luck having a child, even if we were "practicing" all the time.*

Amber pushed aside the thought, but it returned to pick at more of her fears. There was the possibility that she was sterile too, and she couldn't have a child. It might explain why she and Marcus were never successful, though they'd never used protection.

Then again, there was also the chance that she didn't have enough halfling genes to carry a vampire baby. Either way, the odds were high that Amber couldn't get pregnant, and she'd be a failure in yet another way.

The bathroom door opened, and Amber sat up to look over the edge of the tub before she offered Claudia a wave. "Come to wish me luck?"

Claudia laughed coyly and said, "No, I'm here to give pointers."

Amber walked into Emil's bedroom and closed the door behind herself. Her gaze sought out Vicky first, who sat stiffly on the side of the bed, fully clothed in her usual jeans and sleeveless Lycra top.

They exchanged a worried glance, but Vicky didn't offer last minute warnings. Amber wouldn't have heeded them anyway.

Emil also seemed apprehensive when she turned her attention to him. He lay with his back propped against the headboard. His arms were crossed over his chest, but while the pose was normally casual for him, he'd tucked his hands under his armpits, like he was covering his chest.

He was dressed in a black terrycloth bathrobe which hung past his knees, and the robe along with his nervous pose made him look like a new groom who had no clue what to do with his virginal bride.

Amber crawled onto the foot of the bed and hissed a quiet snicker. "Relax, Emil. This isn't my first time dancing horizontally." She almost rolled her eyes as she thought, *Like I'm an experienced slut. I've had exactly one boyfriend in my entire life.* That thought was downplaying her experience, and she admitted it to herself instantly.

While he was effeminate in appearance, Marcus had a distinctly male enthusiasm for sex. Which was funny, because he also displayed a feminine ability to have multiple orgasms on most nights. He was fond of experimenting and role-play too, so Amber wasn't exactly an innocent lamb being led to the slaughter.

But Marcus had been a gentle lover throughout all of his sexual games, and Claudia had just warned Amber to expect something decidedly less timid.

Seeming to read her thoughts, Emil confessed, “This is going to be hard on me. I prefer my women to be...less delicate, and I’d much rather be with Vicky than with you.”

Amber nodded and crawled up toward Emil. “Then Vicky can get undressed, and you can watch her. I don’t mind.” Stung by the minor insult, she mentally added, *You’re just the middleman here, buddy.*

Amber reached out to pull back the flap of his robe, her eyes bulging when she saw his soft cock laying down the side of his leg. Claudia neglected to mention that he would be so big.

She threw the robe back into place and thought, *Ohfuckohfuckohfuckohfuck—*

Sitting back on her haunches, Amber’s wide brown eyes moved to stare at Emil, and his expression of dismay was similar to hers.

“Still raring to go?” Emil asked. *Now she looks twelve with that expression. How sad is this? I can drain a dozen humans without swallowing an ounce of guilt, but she gives me one look, and I feel like a dirty old man.*

But it was more than just her age or her frightened look that were bothering Emil. She wasn’t interested in him. He was just the sperm bank donor, and he knew it.

But then, he didn’t care for Amber either. He was far more interested in being with Vicky, but he doubted he could come between the two, except to perform a charitable task.

The awkwardness of the moment killed every trace of

erotic interest within Emil. So, even if he'd agreed to help, he wasn't even remotely in the mood for sex.

Amber finally calmed her heart down, and she took another long breath to steady herself. She let it go and dropped forward on her hands to crawl over Emil's legs. Laying her hands on his shoulders, she leaned against him and bit down on his collarbone.

Emil clutched the sheets and sucked air between his clenched teeth in a surprised hiss, his eyes filling with a look bordering on rapture.

He raised his hands to grip her hips, pulling Amber down to rub her body against his. The rush of pain mixed with pleasure had him turned on faster than he would have thought possible from a half-starved halfling.

Amber's hands slipped under his robe, pulling it away while Emil sat up to help shrug it off. He closed his arms around her waist to pull her onto the bed, but she released her bite and whispered, "Wait."

Emil was stunned by his own self-control when he froze. He'd even stopped breathing while he waited for her next instruction.

"Just let me do the work at first," Amber said, her warm breath rushing over his chest. "Once I'm used to you, you can ravage me however you prefer."

The promise intrigued him, even if he didn't believe it.

He leaned back on the headboard while Amber slipped her robe off her shoulders. She didn't toss it away, but rather she

pooled the fabric around her hips. Her logic was, it wouldn't be so bad if she didn't have to see what she was doing.

She was half right, anyway. Not thinking about how big Emil was, she was able to avoid panicking. Then she could rock her hips to rub her sex over his, bringing him to full stiffness easily.

She raised his cock and tried to sit down over his hips. Her body resisted his, and a sharp gasp burst from Amber's lips.

Her skin stretching wasn't a scorching pain, but the feeling was very close. In spite of her instinct to freeze, Amber sank lower, and the burning sensation spread out to fill the rest of her body with a smoldering heat.

She locked gazes with Emil, expecting him to reach for her hips to pull her down. But he kept his hands on the bed, his fingers digging at the covers and tearing holes in them.

Amber's efforts at fitting herself were not being kind to Emil. She was alternately bending or squeezing his shaft, and yet it was just enough pain to please him. His doubts about her ability to satisfy him were long gone, and in their place was a longing to take control.

But her promise kept him in check. *You can ravage me however you prefer.* Her words echoed in his mind and sent a tremor of exhilaration racing through him.

Once Amber was certain he wouldn't force her to move faster, she leaned over and clamped her teeth down on the same spot again, evoking another pleased grunt from him.

Adjusting to him took much longer than Amber expected, and she was covered in a sheen of sweat by the time that she had settled herself over his hips. Her legs burned from the effort of holding herself up, and her lungs felt too tight to allow for a normal breath

Underneath her, Emil was trembling. The effort to restrain himself became harder with every passing minute, and he clenched his jaw, his teeth grinding audibly.

She was still for too long, and he dropped his hands to clasp her hips. Then not even her rapid head shaking could stop him from taking over. In fact, the pain she inflicted on his shoulder spurred him on.

He raised her body only a few inches before he let go of her. Amber couldn't keep herself up, and she sank onto him quickly. She stiffened and uttered a muffled cry, but Emil was already raising her again.

Amber moaned against his shoulder, and when she bit down harder, his stretching skin popped and loosened around her teeth. Emil grunted in pleasure and drove himself into her, raising his hips from the bed.

Cool, thick blood flooded Amber's mouth, and she released him, pushing herself away while she sputtered. The taste wasn't unpleasant, but she was panting hard, and she was afraid that she might drown in the wound.

Her gaze fell on the bite, and she felt horrified by the jagged ugliness of it. But there was an unreal quality lent to the wound by the dark blue blood leaking in slow streams, or by the

blue color which flushed the skin surrounding the bite.

Emil lifted her up at a faster pace, and he raised his hips from the bed when she dropped, thrusting into her eagerly.

A loud moan tore free from Amber's chest, and she had no sooner gasped in air before the next thrust sent another moan erupting out of her.

Amber grabbed his thighs to hold herself in place. Emil still tried to raise her, and his eyes were lit by an animal need for release. Panting for air, Amber nodded and whimpered, "I'm ready."

Emil sat up and closed his arms around Amber. He held her tightly as he rose up on his knees, and then he leaned over, laying her on her back. His embrace tightened again and he pulled her down as he thrust his hips up.

Their union produced a pop of flesh meeting flesh, and Amber's eyes bulged wide. Her mouth fell open, but her voice failed her.

Emil gave her no chances to recover between each thrust. The bite wound throbbed in pulsing waves, and his body thrummed in time with their ebb and flow. His breath rushed to and away from his lungs, synchronized perfectly with the pounding ache, and with every new breath, he was sampling her aroma and her taste.

Emil's mouth watered. He needed to feed from her.

Amber felt his cool breath rushing over her shoulder, and then the back of a smooth hand slid over her throat. Emil lifted his head away, and the hand rose with him.

Amber opened her eyes and saw Vicky's wrist pushed into Emil's mouth.

Vicky had almost waited too long, but she was hypnotized by Amber. Her musky scent was intoxicating Vicky, pulling her into a state near bloodlust.

When Emil opened his mouth, he wasn't aiming for Amber's throat. He moved to bite into the skin above her collarbone, just as she had done to him.

Emil's grip on Vicky's wrist was timid, and he didn't draw back on the wound. He didn't notice that she was bleeding, and he was only barely aware of her wrist in his mouth. His senses were still tuned to Amber as he rutted over her prone, pale body.

Though he'd said he had no interest in her, she had his full attention from the moment she'd bit him.

Amber shocked them both by pulling Vicky's wrist away. She nodded at Vicky, her mouth turning up in a smile while her eyes sent a silent message, *I'm okay*.

Her other arm looped around Emil's neck, and she pulled his head down to her sweat-slick skin. Emil needed no other incentive to act, and he bit her, his pointed fangs piercing her soft skin like tissue paper.

Amber whined, clamping her teeth over her bottom lip. Her eyes squeezed shut as her face tensed in a pained expression, but she didn't struggle. Her arm around his neck remained loose, though she squeezed Vicky's wrist with a vice-like grip.

Then his bite loosened, and he began to lap his tongue

over the wound. A low growl rose from Emil's chest, the animal inside him responding with pleasure over the exotic taste of Amber's halfling blood. His thrusting pace quickened again, and he grunted louder. His hands clutched her shoulders, drawing the skin around the bite taut.

Amber moaned as his tongue slid over the raw wound again. Every nerve in her body felt almost as raw, and her legs and stomach were burning with tension.

Emil fell into a bloodlust, unable to stop himself from drawing blood from the wound. He tightened his arms around her body, his thrusts now a flurry of erratic pops.

Amber screamed when Emil began to drink from her, and the feeling of tension shot up her spine, folding her back in an arch while her hands dropped to clutch at the covers. Her scream subsided, and then her voice rose into a sobbing cry as her body fought against an invisible barrier, one that was stretched to the breaking point. Her breath hitched, and she sobbed again as her tunnel clenched around Emil's cock.

Emil's growl rose into a loud groan, and he stiffened, his closed eyes scrunching together more tightly. The strength melted from his limbs, and he rested on his forearms. He was panting through his nose before he raised his head and pulled his mouth away from her collarbone. His breath shuddered out of him in heaving gasps.

Amber released Vicky's hand and wiped her damp hair out of her face. Her voice soft and ragged, she whispered, "How bad is it?"

Vicky offered her a thin smile. "It looks like a movie bite. You'll be fine with a few gauze pads." She let go of a nervous laugh then, because the alternative was to burst into tears. "You really took a big risk, Amber."

Emil pulled away from Amber with an exaggerated slowness, then rolled onto his back. He stared at the ceiling with a dazed expression, his hands laying limply at his sides.

Amber couldn't resist teasing him. "Can vampires smoke? Because you look like you could use a cigarette."

He rolled his head to the side to smile at her with genuine awe. "Did Vicky tell you what to do?"

"Nope, but Claudia did." Amber's lips split into a grin when recognition dawned on Vicky and Emil at the same time. "I know I said I didn't want to be a snack, but I might let her take a sip to pay her back for the help."

Vicky laughed and shook her head. "Okay, now I'm jealous. Everyone else is getting free samples, but I'm not."

Amber snorted and said, "You've had more than a sample."

Vicky faked a pout at having her bluff called, and she folded her arms over her chest. "I'm still jealous. I had to watch all of that, and now both of you are drained while I'm still primed up with nothing to do about it."

Emil laughed and moved his arm to lay a hand on her thigh. "Who said *I* was drained?"

Claudia listened at the door, satisfied that the nightlong orgy was finally over. She balanced the serving tray on one hand and opened the door, a laugh rising from her lips when she beheld the jumbled pile of limbs and tattered bed clothes in the middle of the exposed mattress.

Laying a hand over her chest, Claudia asked, “Sweet Satan, did anyone survive?”

“I did.” Emil playfully raised his hand and then began extricating himself from the pile to take one of the glasses of blood from the tray. Vicky was up next, and she sat beside Emil, smiling gratefully as she reached for a glass.

However, Amber was so exhausted that she had to crawl weakly to rest against the headboard. Her eyes were glazed as if she was heavily drugged, and her skin glistened with sweat.

“I hope you didn’t bring blood for me,” Amber said in a rasping, dry voice.

Her vocal chords felt rough after many hours of moaning and screaming. She had two other wounds on her shoulders, one for both of the times Emil pulled her back down to trade places with Vicky.

He’d drunk less from her on their second and third coupling, but Amber was still woozy from blood loss. When combined with the euphoria of multiple orgasms, it wasn’t as bad as Amber had been expecting from Claudia’s description of vampire sex.

Claudia leaned over, lowering the tray to show Amber the glass of milk. “No, Charles went to the store. He picked up some other food for you too, but I thought you might need something to drink after the ordeal you’ve just been through.”

Amber moaned around a mouthful of milk, shaking her head before she swallowed and said, “Not the right word for it.”

“Gauntlet,” Vicky offered.

“It...” Amber looked up and rejected a few words before she shook her head. “It was an experience, to be sure.”

Claudia’s laughter was a happy, musical sound that made it even harder to forget that she was drinking the equivalent of two people per day. She asked, “What do you think, Emil? Can we keep them?”

“Oh, yes,” Emil agreed readily. His laugh sounded breathy and exhausted. “I didn’t think I’d care for Amber, but she grew on me quickly.”

“I think that may be the other way around, and you grew in her quickly.” Claudia sat down close to Amber and patted her glowing cheek, enjoying the heat still radiating off of Amber’s body. “You know, it might not take on the first try.”

Amber nodded, then stifled a yawn. “I guessed that already, but it’s okay. Part of getting pregnant is the practice, right?”

Emil laughed, his eyes filled with amazement as he watched Amber drain the glass of milk. “Does nothing get under your skin?”

“Yeah, you did by a few centimeters,” Amber said.

Emil laughed again, and there was a note of admiration instead of the derision she'd come to expect from him. "I think you could drink blood now without freaking out."

Amber made a face, but it vanished under a thoughtful expression. "Yeah, I might as well try it now."

She held out her hand and took Emil's glass, finding only a small sip was left in the bottom. She tipped the glass back, but once the blood was in her mouth, she couldn't swallow. The contrast of flavors between the film of milk left in her mouth and the half-mouthful of blood quickly merged into one foul taste, and the glass dipped to her lap.

Amber's gaze flicked from Emil to Vicky, and then to Claudia, and all of the vampires were quietly snickering at her perturbed expression.

Emil's soft laughter ended in an amused sigh. "I'd tell you to swallow it, but that sounds dirty for some reason."

Amber swallowed, and then she made a disgusted face. "Ugh, I think I'd prefer semen."

Vicky laughed wickedly. "No, Amber, the baby can't live on blow jobs alone."

Chapter 7

Monday, August 4, 1997

Lucas settled into the passenger seat while Charles loaded another bottle into the ice chest in the back of the black Silverado. The ice chest was a refrigerator model that plugged into the vehicle's electrical system.

Along with the second chest on the other side of the cargo space, the SUV had the capacity to carry thirty victims' worth of full bottles. (A feat which required taking multiple donations from different pets of the same blood type.) The chests also kept the bottles chilled, allowing the vampires to take their time in making collections.

Returning to the driver's side door Charles dropped into his seat. As he shut the door, he noticed the distant look glazing Lucas' eyes. He started the engine, and then he snapped his fingers to get Lucas to look up. "Maybe our next stop should be a snack for you instead of a collection."

"No, breakfast is still holding me," Luca's said. "I was just thinking that maybe I should tell Vicky that my father was a halfling. She has the idea that all of the hybrids died, so maybe she wouldn't worry so much if she knew that someone came out all right."

Charles snorted as he pulled the SUV away from the curb. "Lucas, how many other hybrids have you met?"

“None,” Lucas conceded.

“And your mother was bound in a straight jacket for most of her pregnancy, was she not?”

“Yeah, it probably won’t help.” Lucas was silent for a few seconds before he shrugged. “Now that I think about it, I guess my history doesn’t apply to Amber getting pregnant anyway.”

“Nope, she’s got a whole other mess to sort out.” Charles turned the Silverado onto the access road, sighing at an irritated thought. “Sometimes I wonder what goes through Claudia’s head.”

“Hormones,” Lucas quipped.

Charles laughed and nodded his agreement. “Yeah, that could be it. Still there’s something about Amber. Emil seems just as enchanted with her as Vicky and Claudia, and you and I are the only ones she hasn’t put under a spell.”

Lucas shifted uncomfortably in his seat, debating with himself on whether he wanted to broach the topic or not. He coughed and said, “Speak for yourself.”

Charles glanced over at Lucas and arched an eyebrow, his pale face filling with confusion. “I thought you were avoiding her.”

Nodding, Lucas grimaced with disgust. The expression was sincere, and he hesitated to speak only because he was repressing a physical urge to shudder. “Of course I am. She’s not the least bit attractive, so I’m never sure why Emil gets so excited around her. Personally, I think she looks like an underfed chipmunk.”

He paused while Charles guffawed and nodded his agreement. “Still, after I get home from making collections, the house is full of her scent. You’d think Emil was fucking her all over the house for how much the place hangs with her odor. I think that’s her spell. Her scent is simply too intoxicating for us.”

Charles nodded, but he kept his thoughts to himself. He too was avoiding the house to stay away from Amber’s scent. Amber didn’t look very good in her present, starved condition, but she might be prettier, if she put on more weight.

Her scent *was* attractive already, and just as Lucas said, her enthralling presence filled the house. Her pheromones mingled with the aromas of blood and sex, and if Charles stayed in the house for too long during the night, he found himself fantasizing about taking Amber.

It wasn’t like he could do anything with her. She was physically repellent to him, so he would have to close his eyes to play with her. She already had a partner, and she’d chosen Emil to mate with. Besides, Charles also had to think about an irate partner who might catch him sneaking off to play with Amber.

No, he thought. Claudia would have been willing to lend him to Amber if she chose him. Claudia was already under Amber’s “spell,” so she hadn’t asked Charles his opinion before making the offer.

He’d no sooner had the thought before he conceded that he didn’t mind. There was something alluring in Amber’s scent, a mixture of human and halfling blood that made her appealingly exotic. She joked about her dislike of feeding vampires, yet

she let Emil and Claudia take small sips from her whenever they asked. Vicky didn't, and Charles wasn't sure how she'd managed to abstain from such a tempting offer for so long.

To avoid caving in, Charles had spent more time out of the house making collections with Lucas. The refrigerator was almost overstocked, but he kept working anyway. Otherwise, he might start asking Amber for a sample.

That was her power. If she offered him a small sip just once, she could walk all over him forever. *The first hit is free*, he thought, and then he shook his head to push the temptation away.

Charles turned on the radio, spinning the dial until he found a death metal song playing, *Let The Napalm Rain*.

Lucas smirked at Charles, though his expression was grateful. He wanted the conversation to die as well. It was best for vampires not to dwell on temptations left unexplored for too long.

They pulled up to a duplex in the middle of the block, their next destination to collect a bottle of O positive. The air around the subdivided house thumped with a steady bass beat from a techno song.

Their pet, Lucy, opened the door and grinned like a Cheshire cat as she waved them in. "I hope you don't mind, but I invited some friends to meet you."

Lucas stepped inside, his gaze moving across the living room, where a set of triplets stopped dancing to gape at his red eyes.

Lucy noticed his disappointed expression, and she went to the stereo to turn it down. Her expression became downcast as she asked, "What's wrong? I thought you would like them?"

Shaking his head, Lucas explained, “Lucy, liking twins or triplets is a human quirk. For a vampire, drinking from triplets is like sipping the same brand of wine from three different bottles. If I’ve tasted one of the sisters, I’ve tasted all three.”

“Bummer,” the three sisters said in perfect unison.

Charles laughed behind Lucas, a deep rumbling sound that competed with the bass from the techno song. “On the other hand, if you’re only taking little sips, it’s like getting half a glass instead of a sample.”

Lucas laughed and asked, “But is the glass half empty, or half full?”

One of the sisters said, “The glass is very nervous.”

The two other women nodded their heads with faultless synchronization.

Chapter 8

1938

Glasgow, Scotland

Vicky woke up and smiled at William, who sat on the side of her bed. A sketchpad rested on his lap, and he held a stick of charcoal. His fingers were stained from making smudges for gradient tones, and under his right eye was a grey streak, probably from an itch he couldn't resist scratching.

He raised the pad to show her his efforts, and she nodded her approval. Then he said, "I want to teach you how to keep your casual thoughts hidden from me."

Vicky nodded again, pushing herself up on her forearms while she regarded William with a curious expression.

He'd already explained how casual thoughts were the constant line of internal dialogue, which every sentient creature made during their wakeful hours. But he'd never before mentioned that she might have a way to keep him out of her head.

William nodded a confirmation of her thoughts. "If I wanted to, I could still probe your mind to know what you're really thinking. But I want to show you how to protect your thoughts from passive scans."

Vicky frowned, unable to keep herself from worrying. "Why is it important?"

“It’s not that important right now.” William set the charcoal down on the nightstand, and then he shifted the sketchpad to the bed while he added, “You deserve a measure of privacy, and I can give that to you with only a few minutes of training.”

Recognition came to Vicky, and her face filled with shame. “Are my fantasies becoming too much for you?”

William laughed. “I could never get tired of anything you do. In fact, I like listening in on some of your fantasies.”

Vicky thought, *Then why won’t you let me act on them?*

William dropped his head to avoid meeting her gaze. “You know why, Vicky.”

She did, but she still couldn’t keep her frustrations contained. They spilled out of her in a bitter huff, and yet William still wouldn’t look at her.

During the year that Vicky had lived with William, her feelings for him grew. His playful flirting captured her interest, and her affection for him was so powerful by then that he could send her pulse racing just by holding her hand.

William leaned back, resting his weight on one hand while he brought up the other to touch her cheek. He left a smudge behind on her skin, and his lips split in a guilty grin as he chuckled.

Vicky didn’t care. His grazing touch sent sparks trailing over her skin, and her heart fluttered fast enough to sound human.

She sat up and laid her hand on William’s chest, frowning when he pulled away from her. “You don’t have to be afraid of me, William. I could never...” Her voice dried in her throat.

She wanted to promise that she wouldn't hurt him. But her teeth ached, and all she could think about was how badly she wanted to taste him.

"I'm not afraid of you," William said. "I'm afraid for you."

Vicky took his wrist, laying his hand over her breast. He tried to pull away, and she held on. Her voice was a soft, desperate whimper as she pleaded, "You already have my heart, William. I'm offering the rest of myself to you now."

William watched her with a helpless, pained expression, his green eyes filled with conflicting emotions. He loved her, but the emotion was locked in an intense struggle against his fear, anguish, and frustration.

Vicky had denied herself for too long. Every night that she spent with William, more of her self-control eroded. Her nights were filled with distracting fantasies of seducing William, and they blended into dreams that were far less restrained when she slept each day.

Anger rushed in her chest. It was his fault, because he was always reaching out to touch her, to pose her, or just to cup her cheek. He knew the effect he had on her, but when she tried to touch him, he denied her. Every rejection was given with compliments, but the one way barrier that kept their relationship platonic was maddening to Vicky.

In reaction to her anger, William again raised his hand to touch her face.

Vicky couldn't stand waiting for him to decide, and she leaned forward, brushing her lips over his.

His breath pulsed out in a gasp, and aggravation spread from his eyes to the rest of his face as he drew his head back. “Don’t you ever listen to me?”

Vicky pouted, her eyes pleading with him. Moving his hand over her breast, she guided him to caress her, and then she raised her head to kiss him again.

His convictions broke down, and he returned her kiss, lapping his tongue over hers while he exhaled a hot, shaking breath. Vicky breathed in, accepting the soul kiss before she returned it to him.

When he drew back, she slid a hand behind his neck, urging him to lean his head down to her shoulder.

He read her thoughts and knew what she wanted, but still he hesitated.

“Please,” she whispered.

William bit her shoulder, and her back stiffened as a spasm ripped across her body. She started to pant, and cramps shot down her inner thighs, forcing her to clamp them together to relieve the tension.

When he leaned over her, she sank back to the bed willingly. His hands fumbled first to push the covers away, and then to hike the bottom of her nightgown while she unbuttoned his pants. She tugged them and his underwear down onto his thighs.

His sex slid over hers, and his hips pressed against her aching thighs. But he didn’t take her then. He gently urged her to rest her lips over his collarbone, his voice erupting in a deep grunt when she sank her fangs into his flesh. He repaid the shock by biting her earlobe, tearing through her skin to draw blood.

Then he sank into her, and Vicky's voice warbled in a muffled cry of pleasure. She released her bite and moaned again as his blood filled her mouth. Swallowing quickly, she had to resist the urge to draw back on the wounds.

Closing her arms over his sides, she raked her nails and drew deep scarlet rails down his pale skin. William groaned and arched his spine, pressing his body down over hers.

He wound an arm under Vicky's lower back to guide her. His teeth clutched her earlobe, and yet his free hand flitted over her body with a light, timid touch. His other arm pulled her down while he bucked his hips and grind his pelvis against hers.

Vicky was lost in a flood of sensations, both painful and pleasurable.

Her body clenched in a climax, and William paused, his face flushed with color while he gasped for air. Once Vicky settled into soft whimpering, he released his bite. He rose up on his hands, taking her wrists to pin them over her head.

William sank into her again, moving with an achingly slow speed. Vicky wanted to grab his hips to speed him up, but he pressed his weight down hard on her wrists. The spikes of pain flashing through her arms turned into a shiver that raced down her spine, and she whined softly in response.

Despite his slow pace, Vicky's body tensed again. But no matter how she writhed under her lover, she could not push herself to the point of breaking the knots binding her insides.

William drew back, almost pulling away from her completely before he thrust into her hard.

The knot tore free.

He plunged into her again, and Vicky uttered a surprised cry, straining her arms to free them. She wanted to pull him close in an embrace. The taste of his blood still lingered on her tongue, but the craving to lick the wound still could not be satiated.

His shaft swelled inside her, pulsing with his orgasm. William lowered himself, pressing his body to hers. He allowed her to clean the trails of blood that slid down his chest, and then he rolled over to lie against her side.

They laid together for an hour. William's hands roamed over her body, adding more streaks of charcoal dust. His mouth lingered at the nape of her neck while he nipped the skin between his teeth, every nibble drawing a soft giggle from her.

But at last he drew away from her with a weary sigh, and he began to straighten himself up as he said, "I still need to train you tonight."

Vicky nodded. "I'm listening."

"A diversionary thought isn't hard to make. You just think of one thing repetitively until it becomes second nature to be thinking of it first. Underneath that thought, your internal musings will still continue on, but they'll be cloaked by the diversion."

"What should I think of?" Vicky asked.

"I can't say, but it should be a thought which would discourage telepaths from looking beyond the surface." William laughed and shook his head. "That's very flattering, but that thought might cause a halfling to dig faster."

Vicky cast about for an idea before she had one, and she knew she'd picked well when William grimaced. "How's that?"

William swallowed, his mouth a hard, thin line while he tried to keep himself from throwing up. "Yes, that might work."

Chapter 9

Tuesday, October 7, 1997

The next two months disappeared in a blur. The time was either spent in domestic bliss by vampire standards, or in hedonistic savagery by human standards. In either case, Vicky and Amber couldn't be happier with their new home or with each other.

They used Emil, and they both admitted it freely. Being a lonely vampire who hadn't had sex since before the Civil War, Emil didn't feel guilt in being used either. In fact, he was enjoying his role as the "middleman" in their relationship.

He still wasn't as attracted to Amber as he was to Vicky, but Amber was starting to look better with her weight returning near her normal levels. During the weeks of "practice," Claudia force-fed Amber in preparation for her pregnancy, and Amber had put on enough weight that she didn't look anorexic.

When Amber checked her reflection in the mirrors around the house, she no longer cringed. Her cheeks had regained most of their roundness, but her chest still hadn't recovered from the rapid weight loss. With her diminished curves and pale complexion, she looked even more like a porcelain doll when she dressed in the right outfits.

Of course, she didn't have many of her gothic outfits left. She had made the mistake of wearing her favorite dress for Emil, and he'd ripped many of the seams in his eagerness to undress

her. It was amusing at the time, because Emil had looked like a kid unwrapping a Christmas present with reckless abandon.

Only in the afterglow of their coupling did Amber look over at the tattered pile beside the bed and think, *Well, that was my favorite dress. Now it's a bunch of cleaning rags.*

Claudia spent the next week trying to repair the damage, but Amber convinced her to declare the dress a lost cause.

Claudia doted on Amber almost as much as Emil and Vicky did. Whether it was fondness or just her maternal instincts kicking in, Claudia treated Amber with such kindness that Amber was ready to call her Mom.

The only two she couldn't reach were Lucas and Charles, but they were cordial to her whenever they were in the house. Mostly, the two drove around to collect bottles of blood to keep the refrigerator stocked.

There was no way Amber could know that the men stayed away to avoid her scent. But lately, they were also absent because they'd grown tired of her constant questions.

She didn't mean to, but Amber pestered all of the vampires, asking what kinds of tests she needed to use to know if she was pregnant. She asked when the cravings would start, and she wondered what kinds of changes her body would go through once the cravings began. But no matter who she asked or how she phrased her questions, the answer was always a coy smile and the same two words: "You'll know."

The night Amber knew, she sat up in bed with a dreadful thirst and a fire burning in her gut.

The sun had barely set, and the sky outside was tinted violet with the last dying rays of light. Vicky was still asleep, so Amber got up quietly and went to the kitchen. She opened a bottle of milk, and suddenly her senses seemed too sharp.

The scent of the milk was obviously fresh, but Amber doubled over and gagged as though she'd smelled something long fermented and molding.

Amber capped the bottle and shelved it. Shutting the door, she staggered away to the sink, intending to slake her thirst with water from the tap. She stopped herself, her head craning toward the refrigerator.

She shuffled back to it and opened the door. Leaning over, she eyed the rows of green glass bottles with queasy uncertainty. But if her brain was slow to catch up, her body wasn't. Her stomach growled, demanding to be filled, and filled quickly. She reached out for a bottle on the second rack.

Uncapping the top, Amber nearly swooned with hunger at the scent of blood, and she tilted the bottle back, chugging mouthful after mouthful as though it were the sweetest ambrosia nectar.

She asked herself, *Goddess, am I really doing this?* But her concern didn't last long, and she set the empty bottle in the door-shelf, bending down to grab another.

"Pull out an A positive for me, please," Claudia said from behind her.

Amber barely flinched as she turned her head to offer the vampire a bloody grin. "I didn't know they were organized."

“Yeah, check the upper right corner of the label and you’ll see a letter in red marker.”

Amber looked down at her “empty” and said, “So that was O negative. I guess I’ll try the A positive too.”

She was stunned to discover that she could tell the difference. The contrast in flavors was subtle, like tasting the difference between two years of the same wine. Both were light and sweet on her tongue, and she couldn’t be sure which type she liked more.

Amber drained the bottle, and then she looked back at the refrigerator while she smacked her lips and tried to suck away the residue left on her teeth.

Claudia got up from her chair at the kitchen table, patting Amber’s shoulder as she said, “I’ve got the next round.”

Dropping into a seat, Amber set aside the empty bottle next to Claudia’s. Traces of blood lingered on the sides of the glass, and she had to resist the urge to grab the bottle and tip it up to try for those last drops.

She imagined draining bottle after bottle in a drinking contest with Claudia, but the image didn’t have the effect that she thought it would. Instead of a tremor of revulsion, Amber shuddered with giddy excitement.

Amber frowned at Claudia, who returned to the table with two more bottles of A positive. “I’m going to drink a whole person, aren’t I?”

“No, not today.” Claudia passed the third bottle to Amber and returned to her seat on the other side of the table.

“You’ll probably be fine with this round. Is your stomach still burning?”

“No, now it’s just a warm throb,” said Amber.

Claudia nodded as her lips thinned in a knowing smile.

“Yep, and when you finish that bottle, it will just be a mild sensation of warmth.”

Amber snorted and said, “I’ve got a bun in my oven.”

Claudia laughed with her. “So, now you know.”

Amber nodded as she uncapped her bottle. “Yeah, I guess I do.”

Not being driven by unborn pilots, the rest of the coven was slow to rise, but quick to begin celebrating once they heard the good news. Even Charles and Lucas moved in to cuddle with Amber and sample her scent. Both men pecked kisses on her cheeks, offering her beaming smiles of pride.

Suddenly, being pregnant made her a full member of the coven instead of an outsider looking in. She hadn’t realized she was being treated differently until then. But the constant brushing touches of the male vampires during the evening were so unlike their formerly aloof behavior, it was impossible not to notice the change.

By midnight, she also understood the kind of hunger pangs they suffered if they didn’t feed, and she was already craving hot blood instead of the chilled syrup in the bottles.

Syrup? She caught herself and shook her head at the awful absurdity of her mental slip. Less than a night with the cravings passed, and already she had accepted that blood was the only food she wanted. The idea still upset the human part of her mind, and her chest tightened with fear at the idea that she might just as quickly start to think of normal humans as cattle.

Vicky noticed the change in her mood, and she took Amber's wrist, pulling her up to their room to talk. They sat on the side of the bed facing each other, but Amber couldn't meet Vicky's questioning gaze.

Vicky took Amber's hand, waiting for her to look up. "It's just now occurring to you where this leads, isn't it?"

"I'm losing my humanity to this thing inside me," Amber said.

"You're becoming one of us," Vicky said.

Amber glanced at the window, swallowing down a lump in her throat. "I was being naïve by thinking I wouldn't want to go hunting."

It was neither a question nor a demand for an answer. Amber was just admitting that she'd made her choice without thinking things through.

Vicky still answered, "Yes."

"I just...I would have thought I'd have more respect for them."

"You still will, but you will have respect only for the individuals who you choose to recognize as friends. Everyone else—they're just proteins."

Amber winced, and her pout spread into a wide, guilty frown. "I should feel bad over that. I should feel bad for thinking of those bottles in the refrigerator as being filled with syrup."

"Did you ever feel bad for eating chicken?" Vicky asked. "Your diet is a fact of life, and once your body understands what it needs, your mind follows along pretty quickly." Vicky smiled. "I'll bet you're already craving hot blood, aren't you?"

Amber nodded, and Vicky laughed as she got up. "Come on, I'll make you your first blood tea."

The house felt empty when Emil left with Lucas and Charles to take collections from their pets. Everyone took their meals from the refrigerator, leaving only a few bottles behind for breakfast the next night.

Amber had taken stock after the men left and confirmed that there wouldn't be enough for her and Claudia both. She didn't want to imagine how cranky Claudia could be if she didn't get a full breakfast.

Claudia went to her room to read, and Vicky left to wander around the neighborhood. For the first time that night, Amber was alone.

She didn't like it, and she got a wild urge to check her e-mail. Even talking to someone electronically was better than sitting by herself and thinking too much.

Unpacking her laptop, she went down to the den and

swapped out the phone line. She dialed into the local ISP account that Marcus had set up and then opened the e-mail client. The client was already set up to access the right mail server, so Amber only had to log in to her account.

She realized then that she would have had a much harder time if Marcus hadn't already set up the laptop properly.

The thought became amusing a moment later, because the only new e-mails were all from Marcus. He had apparently started writing a week before according to the dates of the messages.

She read the first message:

Amber,

I'm still hanging out with my brother and his "companion," Simone. (That's what they call each other. You won't believe this, but they make us look normal. >.< Oy!)

They're both really powerful magi, and they were shacking up in Amsterdam with a halfling named Katherine. She trained them, so now they're trying to train me in how to tap into my own abilities.

So far, I haven't had much luck, but I've been missing you and Vicky. I felt awful about leaving without checking in with you. It's just that once Felix dropped this bombshell on me, I couldn't think of anything else.

I'm adjusting to the shock now, and I'm realizing that I left both you and Vicky to fend for yourselves, while I have it great here with my folks.

They've all found out about Jenny, and no one cares. Well, Mom and Dad keep giving me worried looks when I turn into Jenny, but when I ask what's wrong, they just say that it's not a good time to talk yet.

But Felix is really surprising me, because he's so nice to me no matter who I am. When Jenny is out, he calls her Sis.

Simone wants to dye my hair pink to make Jenny look prettier, but I told her I didn't care for that idea. She pushed, and I said you wouldn't care for it either.

Okay, enough gabbing. I'll wait to see if you're pissed at me or not.

*Your boyfriend (And sometimes girl friend),
Marcus*

She wanted to reply to the first message, but she read the next one instead:

*Um hi,
I don't know if you're checking your email often, but I hope both of you are okay.
Jenny*

And then the next:

*Okay, I guess I should apologize better. Maybe you can give me a phone number to call?
Jenny*

And then the next, which she noted had been sent only a few hours prior:

Amber!

Jeez, did you and Vicky run away to make babies together?

Marcus

Amber snorted and hit the reply button, moving the cursor under his message before she wrote:

Wow, you have great timing. Yes, we ran away to make babies. One of us succeeded.

And now that I have your attention: 210-556-5309.

Amber

PS: I've been a lousy girlfriend recently, let me tell you.

She hit send and disconnected the modem once the delivery completed, plugging the jack back into the phone. Setting the laptop on the floor, she counted less than thirty seconds before the phone rang.

Amber picked up the handset and cradled it on her shoulder as she lowered herself back to the floor. "Marcus?"

"Please, tell me Vicky is the pregnant one," he said, not bothering with a greeting.

"I'm sorry, but I can't," Amber said. She rested her legs out across the hardwood floor and crossed them at her ankles. "A few months back, we found out that Vicky can't have kids.

So I'm acting as a surrogate mom."

A long pause followed before Marcus asked, "Who did you find to play the daddy?"

"Making a long story short, Vicky and I moved in with a coven here in San Antonio. By coven, I mean Vicky's people, not ours. The father of my baby is their leader."

"Whoa—wait, you're having a vampire's baby?"

"Yep."

"Are you sure you're pregnant?"

"I found out this morning...er, actually I found out this evening when I got up, and yes, I'm definitely sure. So is the rest of the coven, and...it's amazing how much more they accept me. It's like I'm one of their kind now." She thought, *Har-har, good one, Amber.*

"That's amazing." Marcus made a self-conscious laugh. "So have you dumped me for this leader?"

"Um, well no, but I..."

Marcus was able to finish for her. "You're dumping me for Vicky."

"Yeah."

Marcus sighed. "Damn. I knew I'd screwed up."

"It really wasn't you, so please don't beat yourself up. Vicky and I—you know how we were, and after you left, we started drifting towards each other." Amber groaned at a stray thought, and her face pulled into an expression of disdain. "I swore I'd never say these words, but you know that we can still be friends, right?"

“Can we still be friends with benefits?” Marcus asked in a hopeful sounding voice.

Amber’s eye twitched, but she quickly got over her anger. Then she was able to laugh genuinely. She’d “cheated” on Marcus with Emil, and while she and Vicky hadn’t done anything together, they were sharing a bed. In Arizona, that was technically grounds for a legal marriage.

Right, Amber thought. Her voice was filled with mirth as she asked, “So the only reason you’re calling me now is that you’re feeling horny?”

She laughed at the long delay, and then so did Marcus before he conceded, “It is pretty pathetic, isn’t it?”

“I can’t promise anything, but we’ll see what happens. In the meantime, I’d suggest that you find yourself a replacement girlfriend. Now that I’m pregnant, it might be hard for me to have sex with you.”

“You should be safe until the last few months,” Marcus said. The tone of his voice was melodramatically whiny, and she knew he’d already given up. He was resorting to using humor to relieve his disappointment. “I’ve heard women can have sex right up to the last few months, actually.”

Amber shook her head, more for her benefit than for his. “No, it’s keeping you safe that’s the problem. It’s complicated, and I don’t know if I want to discuss this on the phone.”

“Maybe I can convince Felix and Simone to come down with me to visit your new family,” Marcus said. “I miss both of you, and I’d like to see you, before...”

The troubled tone of his voice just as he trailed off raised the hairs on the back of her neck. Frustrated by his silence, she prodded, “Before what?”

“It’s a long story, and I’m not sure I can talk about it until we’re face to face.”

“Give me some time to make sure it’s okay with the coven leader first,” Amber said. “I’m part of the family here, but I’m still the low chick on the totem pole.”

“I need to talk it over with my brother, since I’m in the same boat as you. Even my dad seems to pick this stuff up faster than me.” Marcus sighed. “Thankfully, my mom is still as hopeless at casting elements as I am.”

“Well, I’m adjusting to my role here pretty quickly.” Amber paused to yawn. “Speaking of which, I’m running a night schedule, and this is late for me.”

“Yeah, I’m running a later schedule myself these days.” Marcus uttered a short laugh. “We’ve moved to the dark side, haven’t we?”

Amber’s mouth felt too dry. Her tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth when she tried to swallow, and her voice was thick as she said, “I’m trying not to slide too far. I’ll talk to you later.”

She didn’t wait for him to say good-bye before she hung up, raising the phone over her head to set it on the table without getting up. She glanced over her shoulder, not surprised to find Vicky standing in the doorway of the den.

“Ready for bed?” asked Amber.

Vicky's expression was bewildered, though she tried to cover for it unsuccessfully by smirking. "You dumped him for me?"

"Yep." Amber stood up and raised her arms in a lazy stretch. "I don't feel the least bit guilty, either. All these months, and I haven't heard one word from him. I can be forgiven for assuming that we were already broken up. He assumed we weren't, so I gave him the bad news." Walking across the den, she grabbed Vicky's hand and started to pull her toward the stairs. "Let's go to bed."

Vicky let Amber lead her upstairs and through the corridor to their room. Amber let go of Vicky to slide off her jeans. She waited for Vicky to undress, and then she crawled onto the bed to lie against Vicky's side.

Amber's mind was buzzing with dark thoughts, but she didn't want to talk about them with Vicky. She was grateful that Vicky didn't notice how fake her cheerfulness was, but even if she didn't give voice to her fears, she couldn't banish them and get to sleep.

Marcus meant his comment as a joke, but Amber truly was moving to a darker side of her nature. She couldn't blame it on the baby, because she'd been drifting away from her humanity before she knew that she was pregnant.

Maybe it was an adjustment that her mind made to deal with vampire mating habits, or maybe Amber began to change when she realized that she was falling in love with Vicky. It might have happened even before then, when she walked into the kitchen where her father and brothers had been brutally mutilated

by Annul. Certainly, some of the damage had been done when the daemon forced Amber to kill her mother. But then, part of the damage might have already been done in her childhood, when Jobe had tried to beat out Amber's love for him.

It didn't matter when her decline started, because now she was moving *too far* from her humanity. Amber lifted her head, peering in the darkness while she tried in vain to search for her partner's face. "Vicky?"

"Hmm?" Vicky hummed, rising from the verge of sleep, though she didn't open her eyes.

Amber hesitated, then asked, "Will you still love me after I become a monster?"

Another hum and a short nod were Vicky's only answers. But the confirmation was enough for Amber, who closed her eyes and let sleep pull her under.

Chapter 10

1939

Glasgow, Scotland

Vicky allowed William to pull her into an alley, assuming that he meant to avoid another police patrol. The cops were becoming more alert due to the number of people disappearing from the city, but so were the citizens. In recent months, William had needed to make more random turns into dark alleys to avoid roving mobs, who were also patrolling the streets each night.

Although William's plan of killing only the lowest citizens in Glasgow was sound in theory, the people of the city had become indignant at the police's inability to locate the killer.

That the victims were criminals didn't matter, nor did it matter that the police were asking the mobs to go back home and not interfere in the ongoing investigation. The men of Glasgow were taking to the streets nightly, and taking a meal was becoming ever more perilous, even with William's abilities guiding them.

William was thinking of neither the police nor the locals when he drew Vicky into the alley. Instead, he pushed her against the wall, pressing his body to hers while he raised up on his toes for a kiss.

Vicky had gone through her second growth spurt, and where she'd been a few inches shorter than William's impressive height of six foot two, he now had to stand on tip toes to kiss her.

Her muscles had filled out from her constant feeding, and she examined herself critically in the mirror all the time. She feared William might not care for her if she got too big, and she considered going on a diet to slim down. Perhaps she could skip meals on certain nights?

But if her diversionary thoughts slipped and William heard her concerns, he would move in quickly to embrace her. To settle her worried thoughts, he would tell her that he loved her no matter what she looked like.

Which didn't quite help, but it did feel good to be in his arms again.

Vicky adored his spontaneous urges to touch and cuddle with her, so when he pushed her back against the wall, she didn't offer protest. She pealed tittering laughter before his mouth closed over hers. Then the pleased laugh became a soft moan.

William broke the kiss and stepped back. He held her hand, his teeth glinting in the darkness as he offered her a grin. "I suspect you're lying when you say you can't work magic."

Vicky returned the smile. "Why is that?"

"Because you're a talented enchantress already."

Vicky giggled at the compliment, but the sound faltered when William's expression fell into a troubled look. He glanced over his shoulder and uttered a groan.

She asked, "What's wrong?"

"We're surrounded." He pointed away toward the end of the alley. "No matter which way we go, we'll run into a patrol or a crowd, and everyone is converging on this street."

Vicky nodded and pulled her hand away from his.
“William, go home.”

“But I can—”

Vicky silenced him by putting her finger over his lips.
“You can’t be seen with me. I can take care of myself. Go, please. I’ll be home in an hour, maybe less.”

William delayed only to cup her cheek in his palm, his silver eyes filled with anxiety. “Be safe.”

It’s not likely, she answered behind her diversionary thought, nodding mutely to send him home without arguing.

He left, and she walked into the middle of the street, watching him rush away on feet which made no sound when they hit the stone-paved road. All she could hear was his panting breath, and that was soon drowned out by the many footsteps of a crowd moving in from the other end of the street. The voices of the men were low as they spoke in murmurs, but they obviously weren’t drunks.

The wind brought their scent, and the men were afraid. But mixed in with their fear was anger. They’d been afraid for too long, and they didn’t care for being held captive by an invisible menace.

Their fear and anger made them desperate to do something to reclaim the night, so that they could once again sleep soundly.

Vicky saw the crowd shuffle out of the darkness, and then they spotted her. The men froze, many of them debating to each other in shocked whispers. This was the monster they sought, but what to do? Cry out for help, or attack?

Vicky didn't give them time to debate. Flicking open her knife, she ran at the men, drawing her arms wide while she let loose a feral screech.

A few of the men broke away from the crowd and ran for their lives, but others tensed, their knives held out in shaking hands. Only one man was armed with a sword, and Vicky noted gratefully that no one was carrying guns.

Vicky leapt high in the air, then tucked her thighs against her body as she dropped. The man with the sword raised his weapon to meet Vicky's leap. The blade glanced off her shin, sliding through the skin and muscle of her calf with a flash of heat that flared quickly into an aching throb when her leg slammed into the man's head. His skull hit the road and split under her weight, and his body spasmed as the life drained out of him.

Vicky stayed on the ground, lashing out to pull or kick men off their feet when they tried to move in for attacks. The men hit the ground hard, dazing them into inaction.

But she could not move in to make any killing strikes. She was too busy dodging slashes and thrusts from the rest of the panicked mob.

One of the men came in at her side, drawing his leg back for a kick. Vicky sat back on her knees, raising her arm to block the blow.

She grabbed his leg, and she was pulling him off of his feet when a man in front of her dropped to slam a headbutt into her forehead. It was Vicky's first "Glesca kiss," and she rocked back, dazed from the impact.

Her face contorted into a mask of rage, and she swung her head forward. Returning the “kiss,” she broke the man’s nose and caved his forehead in. She was sure that he was dead, at least.

Someone looped an arm under her throat. Vicky grabbed the man’s wrist and shifted onto her feet. Despite her weak leg, she spun, holding the man’s wrist to sling him around in a full circle before she released him. His flailing legs knocked aside many of the men who were moving in, or who were just getting up. When Vicky let him go, he piled onto two other men. Vicky could almost believe that she would win the fight.

But the few men left standing backed away rather than try to press the advantage they had with their numbers. Once they were out of range, they formed a wall, and they waited. The wall became two deep as others recovered and rolled away from Vicky, and then the group began to close in on her.

Vicky thought, *Two years fighting crime, and I’m still gonna get chibbed. So much for doing these people a favor.*

All at once, the men fled, dropping their weapons while they flailed their arms about their heads to ward off some unseen menace.

She caught scent of William and turned to see him at the far end of the street. He ran to her, and he encouraged her to lean on him while he guided her home.

Vicky wanted to tell William to leave, but her tongue was stilled by the recurring memory of the men fleeing.

Why had she bothered fighting, when William was capable of sending the men away with a mental command?

She started to feel foolish, and she tried to say as much. But William shushed her and returned to his own thoughts.

Vicky assumed he was brooding until she realized that he was distracted by the effort of moving people out of their path.

They encountered no one else during the walk home, and they were no sooner inside before William started packing. Vicky stood near the bedroom door, watching him with an anxious expression. By then the cut in her leg was just a dull ache that she could ignore, but her wound wasn't what kept her rooted in place.

Glesca had become her home, and she didn't want to leave. After years of running away from the fire in New York, she didn't want to run and abandon all of her things. She didn't want William to give up his home either, or any of his possessions.

She thought, *It's not fair.*

William closed a trunk filled with Vicky's clothes, and then he raised his head to frown at her. "Get moving. We need to be out of here tonight."

"Where will we go?" Vicky asked.

"Edinburgh, probably. We can't go any further north without running into my kin, and if you think the humans here are acting intolerant..." William trailed off when he noticed that Vicky was still standing by the door.

Tears streamed down her cheeks, and she fretted with the tattered hem of her ruined silk blouse.

Sighing, William stepped over to take her hands and stop her from fidgeting. "Don't be like this, Vicky. You knew we would need to move eventually."

“Can’t we pack tonight and leave tomorrow night?” Vicky asked.

William shook his head. “No, we can’t risk feeding you even one more time here. Those men will give your description to the police, and it won’t take long before someone recognizes you.”

“But I thought you could—”

“There is a limit to my power,” William said, cutting her off. “After an exposure like that, it’s possible that the next mob who finds us will be too big for me to send away.” William squeezed her hands. “We’ll leave tonight, and we have to travel light. I’ll make a space under the trunks, so you can sleep during the day. I’ll sleep at night, and you can drive to keep us moving.”

Vicky nodded, and when he let go of her hands, they were no longer shaking. She started to pack, and then she helped him move the trunks into the bed of his truck. By then, the sky was getting light. William helped Vicky crawl into the narrow space under the trunks and crates. He slid another box in behind her and dropped a tarp over the top of the load, plunging the tiny space into complete darkness.

But he didn’t climb into the cab and pull the truck out of the bay garage below his loft. William left the garage on foot, and an hour passed without his return. Vicky longed for sleep, but she forced her eyes to stay open while she panted, trying to find his scent.

But she found nothing.

Another hour passed, and by then, Vicky was almost willing to push out of the crawlspace and suffer the light of the sun to look for him.

Then she smelled him, and she smelled the kerosene. She couldn't hear his footfalls, and she didn't know that he'd gone to his bank to withdraw his assets and close his accounts. She couldn't see the briefcase that he carried in his right hand, filled with cash.

But the kerosene in the ten-gallon can that he carried in his left hand sloshed, and the overpowering petroleum odor alerted Vicky to his plans. William was going to burn down the house, taking with it all of his art and every trace of Vicky's existence.

Vicky closed her eyes, resting her face in her forearms while she cried. She ached not for her losses, but for William's. He had to be suffering by destroying his home and his artwork, but he would sacrifice everything for her.

It was more than she felt she deserved, and her guilt became a gnawing pain to match the animal hunger clawing her stomach.

Chapter 11

Thursday, November 13, 1997

Amber woke up with a dreadful ache in her gums and a feeling of dryness along the inner curves of her lips. The dryness persisted no matter how much she licked her lips, and pressing them together tightly only made her gums hurt more.

Mystified by the new form of discomfort, she got out of bed, smacking her lips as she left the room. Claudia opened the door of her room at the same time, and she laughed softly before she nodded a greeting to Amber.

Crossing the corridor, she leaned over and tapped Amber's lower lip, "Grin for me, please."

Amber did, and then she gasped when realization dawned on her. Her tongue flicked under the edge of her upper teeth, and she felt where her canines dipped lower. Curling her tongue up, she felt the front of the tooth on the right, confirming that her gums were swollen. The change in the shape of her mouth drew her lips apart, which was why they felt so dry.

She followed Claudia to the kitchen, who read her thoughtful expression perfectly. She snickered as she opened the refrigerator. "Your fangs are just coming in, and already you're thinking of biting someone."

Amber nodded, accepting a bottle from Claudia. She opened it and drank quickly, wanting first to slake the thirst drying her throat. The cold syrup also helped to relieve some of the ache in her gums, though her teeth pounded like someone was striking them with a hammer.

When Amber got up to fetch the next round, she said, “I hope I don’t try to bite Marcus or his family during their visit.”

“You’ll be fine.” Claudia uncapped her second bottle and laughed. “If you try to pounce anyone, we’ll peel you off and send you to your room with a nice cup of tea to tide you over.”

Amber smiled around her bottle, nodding while she finished the last swallow. “Thanks. That actually makes me feel better.”

Another month had blurred past before Marcus made arrangements for the visit. Emil was delighted to meet with a family of magi, and he was interested in meeting Marcus. To his mind, any human who could live with a vampire roommate and not freak out was worthy of further investigation.

He was also curious because Vicky had dropped the offhand comment that Marcus didn’t taste human, even if he had the right scent.

Emil had arranged for a caterer to bring out a barbecue dinner for the magi. To make sure the food would be acceptable, he had described the menu to Amber, who passed the information along to Marcus in an e-mail. She’d been glad that she wasn’t on the phone to describe the menu, because she groaned and shuddered at the thought of trying to cram human food into her delicate stomach. If she’d been on the phone, she would have given her new secrets away.

She was really looking forward to seeing the look on Marcus' face when he first saw her again.

Amber had no idea what Marcus would want to talk about, but she didn't care. As the day of his visit drew closer, she allowed herself to admit how much she'd missed him. She didn't feel lonely, nor did she regret breaking up with him. For a straight woman, she was far too happy to be sleeping with Vicky.

Of course, it was still only sleeping. Amber made offers, but Vicky still had to maintain that one final barrier between them. Whether Vicky did it to keep control of herself or the relationship, Amber didn't know. But aside from dropping subtle hints that she was willing to experiment, she didn't want to push Vicky away by being insistent.

Emil had backed away after completing his assignment, and the absence of regular sex had her feeling horny. Marcus' visit would have almost seemed like good timing.

Only, the problem was, Amber had a vastly different definition of what good sex and foreplay were by that point. She still liked cuddling, but she also liked love bites, and she preferred when they bled. She tried to imagine how Marcus might react if she locked onto his shoulder, and she decided it was better to mark him off her list of potential lovers for at least the remainder of her pregnancy.

Which only left Lucas, and her few attempts at flirting with him never failed to evoke a shudder or a snide remark in reply. She only needed to be called repulsive twice to take a subtle hint.

Amber's thoughts occupied her, and being unaware that her attention was wandering, Claudia made small talk while they fed.

She commented, "You're up to four bottles per day. That's almost a full victim."

Amber nodded. It didn't register at first, but after she finished the last bottle and set it aside, she stared at her empties and let her mind wander back to the remark.

Five bottles was a full victim, and once Amber reached that point, she would be capable of draining an average sized person. Her aching teeth throbbed harder at the idea, and she thought, *Give me another two months, and I'll be able to drain a large person.*

But the thought didn't fill her with dread, only a sense of curiosity about what it would be like to struggle with her victim before she bit into their flesh and felt hot blood splash the back of her throat.

The fantasy was so strong, Amber felt a phantom hunger pang. She got up to make herself a cup of tea.

Claudia took much longer to finish her breakfast. Though she looked calm, she was in the middle of an intense feeding frenzy. After setting the filled kettle on the stovetop, Amber made laps from the table to the refrigerator to keep her content. But when she pulled out the last bottle of A positive, she gave Claudia a concerned look.

"You're up to two and a half people with this one."

Waving her off, Claudia said, "Don't worry about me, sweetie. I'm just getting close to popping."

Amber smiled at the revelation. She wanted to joke and say that she was worried for Marcus and his relatives, but instead, she leaned over to lay her hand on Claudia's stomach.

"He's going to be a drummer in a death metal band," Claudia said.

Amber giggled as she felt a foot rhythmically thumping the same spot low on Claudia's right side. "If that's where his feet are, he must be wearing your bladder as a crown."

"Not really a vampire concern," Claudia said.

Amber nodded. "Yeah, well I'm not going as often now."

The baby started to kick harder, and Amber snorted. "Oh, listen, Mom, it's the drum so—" Her eyes swelled wide when she realized what she'd just said.

Claudia laughed, reaching out to pat her now rose tinted cheek. "There's nothing to be embarrassed over. I'll take that as a compliment."

Amber smiled weakly. She didn't object, but her blush was caused more by shame than embarrassment. Acknowledging Claudia as the maternal figure in her life meant that she had let go of her mother, Rachel.

Looking for some way to occupy herself, she started moving the bottles to the sink. But Claudia got up to take the rest to the sink, and she moved Amber aside to rinse them out.

Amber began to pace in front of the stove, sulking to herself though she tried not to show it.

Claudia transferred the bottles into the autoclave mounted under the counter, where normal people would keep a

dishwasher. Drying her hands on a towel from the cabinet under the sink, she leaned on the edge of the counter and watched Amber. She was just about to ask what was wrong when she caught Emil's scent.

Her attention moved to the door, and she didn't notice how Amber also turned to acknowledge Emil's presence. Her senses were becoming sharper, allowing her to pick up the coven leader as he strolled down the main hallway.

He walked into the kitchen and chortled when he spotted Amber. "You look ready to go on your first hunt."

"She's getting her fangs now," Claudia said.

"Yes, I noticed." Emil crossed the room, clasping Amber's jaw lightly between his thumb and finger while he raised her face up. "It makes you much prettier now."

Amber grinned to show off her budding fangs. "Maybe you and I could go back to your room, and we'll see if you like the other changes."

Emil's eyes filled with confusion until Amber pressed her chest against him.

Her breasts had been growing along with the rest of her body, but the change was so gradual that it hadn't registered with him.

He pushed her back gently, noting how her upper arms were getting thicker. The muscles in her thighs stretched the legs of her black denim shorts taut, and the top of the elastic waistband strained around the faint swell of her stomach. She wouldn't be able to wear the shorts much longer with her

stomach expanding, though her legs wouldn't get much larger.

The full transformation was almost complete, and then Amber would almost look like a pregnant vampire, save for her diminutive height of five foot one and her all too human eyes.

Even they had changed as her humanity faded, leaving them with an icy sheen. She looked like a psychotic lost in a fantasy and on the verge of snapping into violence with the slightest provocation.

Emil let go of her arms and stepped back. "No, I did my part, and I'm trying to go cold turkey on you and Vicky both."

"But cold turkey is no fun," Amber whined playfully, her face drawing in a mocking look of sadness. "Maybe you can wean yourself from me slowly?"

Emil laughed, shaking his head. "No, it's better this way. Now let me eat in peace, or I'll be forced to go hunting tonight."

Take me with you, Amber thought, but she swallowed down the comment and returned to the kettle, though it still hadn't whistled yet. She glared at the dials on the stovetop, and then groaned when she realized she'd never turned the electric element on.

Amber was distracted by many wandering thoughts. She was upset about calling Claudia "Mom." She was already feeling moody because of the strange mixture of hormones running through her head, and the slipped comment made her feel even more anxious about her constant fantasies of killing people.

But she was also horny, and she was starting to suffer from cabin fever. The combination of anxiety and depression formed the drops in an emotional roller coaster. But her attention span was a cart moving fast along the track, and she quickly rose back to excitement over seeing Marcus, and happiness that she was going to be a mother.

In truth, her biggest problem was cabin fever. She hadn't left the house since she helped to move in their meager possessions. She always asked one of the men to get something for her, and she stayed safe inside the house.

Protecting herself and her baby became her excuse to stay inside, but the pattern of hiding was already set in her before she moved in with the coven. In every motel, she sat in the room while Vicky went out and hunted. Vicky did the shopping, and Vicky provided everything while Amber laid around in misery.

The memory of her old worries confused her. How could she ever have felt revulsion over Vicky's feeding?

But she couldn't dwell on the thought. Instead, she was thinking about how she hid with Marcus and Vicky in Tucson. She had ventured out to look for kidnap victims, but then she was motivated by the financial rewards. She had continued to go to school, but she talked to no one, and she didn't bother trying to get involved with Marcus' friends whenever they'd come over for gaming nights. Amber either hid in their room, or she hid in Vicky's room.

Before she lived with Marcus and Vicky, Amber hid in her house with her parents and her brothers.

She thought, *Why do I always feel better when I'm hiding?*

Vicky's scent drew Amber from her thoughts, and she crossed the kitchen to hug her partner. She faked a smile, hoping to avoid talking about herself. "Good morning."

Vicky laughed and patted Amber's back. "Good evening." Her smile grew as she brushed her index finger over the bulges in Amber's upper lip. "You're going to be gorgeous when those finish growing. Do they ache?"

"Yeah, a little bit," Amber lied. Her gums were pounding, and she wanted to bite somebody, anybody to relieve the pain.

Vicky noticed the dark glint in Amber's eyes, and her smile softened. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I—I'm just feeling cooped up in the house." Amber faked a hopeful expression. Her eyes swelled as she tried to make "puppy dog eyes." Instead, she made a "hungry killer stare" before she asked, "Maybe we can go out for a walk?"

"Not tonight," Vicky said. "We've got Marcus and his family coming for dinner."

"Yeah." Amber sighed and stepped away from Vicky to return to the stove.

The kettle was starting to hiss once the element was turned on.

Chapter 12

Thursday, November 13, 1997

Vicky opened the front door and stepped back, waving an invitation to Marcus and the unfamiliar couple behind him. Marcus smelled human, for the most part, but both the man and woman stepping into the foyer carried overwhelming scents of exotic races.

The woman carried faint traces of halfling and human blood, but whatever dominant race she belonged to was a mystery.

Vicky was sure that she had known someone with a similar musky scent. But her memory eluded her, and she had no clue why the odor should have been familiar.

Marcus said, "Vicky, this is my brother, Felix, and his companion, Simone Lafleur."

Vicky shook their hands, but her gaze stayed on Simone, whose eyes were a soft silver color. She could almost pass for a halfling, but when a halfling's eyes were silver, the patterns of their irises were always in motion. Simone's iris patterns were fixed, and around the bright silver color was a thin band of dark grey.

Her hair was dyed a bright shade of periwinkle, which provided little contrast with her alabaster skin. Her face was narrow and refined, a beautiful blend of European and Asian facial features that graced her with high, smooth cheekbones and a narrow, pointed chin. The shape of her eyelids also suggested a mixed heritage, and with no other label to apply, Vicky temporarily chose *mutt*.

Simone wore no makeup save for a hint of lip gloss that made her pink lips gleam invitingly. Wide steel hoop earrings dangled from her earlobes in rows. Vicky counted four rings on each lobe.

She also seemed to share a vampiric addiction to black clothing. A loose silk peasant top hung off of her narrow shoulders, while a long cotton skirt trailed down to her ankles.

Vicky noted with approval that Simone wore wide black platform boots. She stepped back and turned to offer Felix an apologetic smile. "I'm sorry for staring, but your companion is quite fetching."

Felix laughed as he slipped out of his black trench coat, draping it over his forearm. He was far more muscular than Marcus, and his thick arms bulged the sleeves of his black shirt. His chest bore a Batman logo in the middle, and whether he wore it with intentions to be sarcastic or not, Vicky still found it amusing.

"I tell her that all the time, though not in such polite terms," Felix agreed, reaching over to smack Simone's bottom. "She is a fox though, isn't she?"

Fox, Vicky thought, and she drew in a deep breath. Yes, it was possible that she was smelling kitsune in Simone's scent. Nodding, she muttered, "Maybe, but not a pure blood."

Laughing, Simone asked, "What?"

Vicky smirked when she realized that she'd talked out loud. "Never mind. Come this way, and the coat closet is that first door under the stairs."

“Gotcha.” Felix turned around to hang up his coat.

Vicky tried to discreetly pant to sample Simone’s scent, but it was hard to tell if she really was kitsune with her standing so close to Felix. He reeked of halfling, so much so that he was almost masking the presence of Marcus. Vicky guessed that he was a stronger genetic throwback than Marcus, and she wondered what kind of mixture their parents were to produce two vastly different scents.

As she led the trio down the hall to the den, she glanced back over her shoulder to compare the brothers again. Felix was at least six inches taller than Marcus, and his angular, pale face was more masculine in appearance. He had bright green eyes, and Marcus’ were blue. He had a broad nose and distinct brow ridge that shaded his eyes, while Marcus’ features were almost Asian for the smoothness of his brow, jaw, and chin.

Vicky’s comparison of the brothers made her wonder if one of them was adopted. Or perhaps they had different mothers. But it seemed unlikely that they could both come from the same parents with so many differences between them.

She had to push aside the thought for later, because when she led the three magi into the den, Marcus gasped at the sight of Amber and froze in the doorway.

Amber stared back at him from where she sat on the couch beside Emil.

Vicky moved to sit beside Amber, while Charles and Lucas took up their places on the divan with Claudia sandwiched between them.

Marcus gawked until Felix and Simone stepped around him. Then he looked around for a place to sit. He took a chair by the fireplace, his mouth pinched in a thin line while he tried to cope with the sudden shock of seeing his transformed ex-girlfriend.

Felix took the other chair, and Simone settled herself across his lap. They both seemed less surprised, but neither knew what Amber had looked like before her transformation began.

Finally, Marcus said, "When you told me that you were adapting well, I didn't think you meant you were turning into a vampire."

"That's not possible," Amber corrected him. "I'll remain in this condition until the baby is born, and then some of the changes will fade." Amber grinned to expose her budding fangs. "I will get to keep some souvenirs, though."

Felix chuckled and said, "I'll bet being a temporary blood drinker must suck."

"No, not—" Amber caught the pun and giggled. "Very good."

"Thanks, I'll be here all night." Felix waved a hand for her to go on. "You were saying?"

"I thought I'd have a problem drinking blood, but it's not so hard once the kid inside me started clamoring for his meals. It doesn't taste or feel the same in my mouth now either." She paused to smile at Vicky. "Now all of her comments that sounded snide before make sense. I can't feel guilt for eating, even if what I'm eating is human blood."

Simone snickered as her gaze wandered to Marcus. “Ask her for a hickey.”

Felix coughed, his smile falling. “I should give us all time to relax and get to know each other, but I need to tell you about something that will spoil the mood.”

Amber glanced at Marcus and asked, “Does it have anything to do with daemons or magi?”

“Both,” Marcus said. “I’ve explained everything we know, and I told them about you working with the McCulloughs.” Marcus cringed and shook his head. “That might have been a mistake. The magi recruited the soldiers from Fort Huachuca to deal with the McCullough family.”

“Right, because the McCulloughs kept magi as slaves,” Vicky said.

“Yes,” Marcus said, and then his face pulled into a look of confusion. “Wait, you knew about this?”

“Marcus, I’ve had a relationship with Ellen McCullough. Do you think she would have kept these things from me?”

“But you never—”

“You didn’t need to know about it,” Vicky said. “You’re close enough to human that I didn’t feel like bothering you with old history.”

“What do you mean, I’m close to human?”

“You smell mostly human, but there’s a trace of halfling, or...maybe something else. But it would have to be halfling, right?”

“What about me?” Felix asked.

“You’re definitely a halfling,” Vicky said. “Your companion is even more interesting, because I think I can smell kitsune on her.”

Emil snapped his fingers. “That’s it!” He laughed and nodded. “I was driving myself crazy trying to remember where I’d smelled that before.” His expression became confused, though he still smiled when he returned his attention to Simone. “That’s really very odd, though. The kitsune are blood drinkers, and you have a scent strong enough that you should have cravings.”

Simone shook her head. “No, I’ve never...” She noticed Felix rolling his eyes, and she asked, “What?”

Felix shrugged. “Oh, let’s see. You’ve sent back rare steaks for not being rare enough. Your favorite dishes are usually raw meat like steak tartar or sushi.”

“Sure, but lots of people eat those things,” Simone said.

“Yeah, but then there’s your midnight snacks,” Felix said.

Chortling, Emil prodded, “Do tell.”

“She’ll open a package of raw meat and cut it into strips. You know that little pad they put on the bottom of the tray to soak up blood?”

Emil shook his head and said, “I’ll have to take your word for it.”

“Why would—oh, right, you don’t hang out much in grocery stores. Anyway, she wrings out the pad and dips the meat in the blood. When we were staying with her parents in Quebec, I caught her snacking on a package of horse meat, and

when she finished, she tipped back the tray to drain the last sip from the bottom.” Felix shuddered, his smile becoming embarrassed. “Ever since then, when anyone says they’re hungry enough to eat a horse, I cringe.”

Simone groaned and slapped his arm. “It’s not that bad. All of my family eats like...” Recognition dawned on her then, and her annoyed expression loosened into a slack look of surprise. Her eyes glazed while she went over her memories. “Huh.”

Emil heaved a sigh. “That’s a shame. I was hoping you could explain who in your family line was a true kitsune. The Asian blood drinkers are supposed to be even closer to extinction than we are. I’ve only seen three in my life.”

“I’ve seen one,” Vicky said. “I lived with him for a few months, but he was killed by the Germans.”

Emil started to ask a question, but then he and all the vampires swung their heads around when they heard a vehicle pulling into the driveway. Even Amber looked away at almost the same time.

Marcus, who’d heard nothing, whined, “Oh, that’s too creepy.”

Laughing jovially, Emil checked the clock and stood up. “That will be the caterers coming to set up dinner in the backyard.”

“What are you talking—” Marcus stopped as someone knocked on the door. He frowned at a stray thought. “Can’t they set up in your kitchen?” Marcus asked, glancing around when the vampires snickered. Amber held a hand over her mouth to hide her

smile when he glanced at her, and then he smiled in embarrassment when he realized that the refrigerator was probably full of blood.

He thought, *Humans are just ingredients in a vampire kitchen.*

Marcus laughed at the morbid thought, and shook his head as he answered his own question. “No, I guess not.”

The barbecue dinner went well, though the caterers were upset that only three people were eating. They were also upset by Simone, who was true to form by sending back her steak for being overcooked. But the caterers were paid and sent home with a large tip to make them forget their indignation.

Felix tugged a baggie from his right hip pocket to roll a joint, only looking up when he started to lick the gummed edge of the paper. He closed the flap and twisted the ends before he held up the joint. “Do you mind if I smoke?”

“Knock yourself out,” Emil said.

“Not with this ditch weed.” Felix sighed as he put away the baggie. “Man, I miss Amsterdam.”

“I don’t,” Vicky muttered.

Felix watched her with a curious expression, but when she gave no explanation, he shrugged and raised his hand, balling it into a fist. He flicked his thumb out, and a flame popped above the tip, hovering without a fuel source until he lit the joint. The blue flame brightened to yellow, then flickered away once the joint had a glowing tip.

Emil chuckled as his mouth turned up in a sarcastic smirk. “Cute. What’s your next trick?”

Felix was genuinely disappointed that his spell impressed no one. “I guess you’ve seen magi playing with fire before.”

“Sure, if by playing you mean roasting on a stake.” Emil leaned back in his seat. “You wanted to warn us about something earlier before we got distracted on the topic of body odor.”

Snorting a plume of smoke, Felix nodded and passed the joint to Simone. “Yeah, but now I think it’s not a warning so much as stating the obvious. We aren’t waiting for a conflict to start. There are a lot of signs that the halfling prophecies are coming true, and the conflict has already begun. We still can’t figure out who all the sides are, but we know the daemons, the halflings, and the magi are already fighting.”

“Are you coming to appeal to us for help?” Emil asked.

“No, I’m just passing along a friendly warning, from one hunted species to another,” Felix said, taking a puff from the joint. “We’re still hiding ourselves. Marcus is going to take forever to train properly. He’s got lousy focus, and he can’t summon anything besides an oversized raindrop. Simone used to lead a coven, but neither of us have much experience in being teachers. All of our skills were passed to us telepathically, so we just know how to summon elements as second nature.”

“Do you still maintain any connections with the halflings?” Emil asked.

“No, we’ve lost contact with them. We’d returned to Texas so Katherine could get in touch with some halflings from another

family, but she was taken by a group of men in black uniforms.”

Sitting up stiffly, Vicky groaned, “You’ve got to be shitting me.”

“Nope, and it’s the same group that you fought with Wendy in Tucson,” Marcus said. “But we were calling them rogue soldiers, and it’s more likely that they’re all magi.”

“What?” Amber asked, her head shaking faintly in disbelief. “How can that be possible?”

“The magi were taking halflings from all over the place,” Felix said. “We think one of the halflings showed them how to bless normal humans to convert them into magi.” Sniffing, he turned his head to blow off the ash on the end of the joint. He took another hit, but no one spoke in the meantime. He had the coven’s undivided attention.

Felix passed the joint to Simone. “We were heading to Austin because Katherine’s father had been taken from out of a high security mental ward in Middlesex. They were wearing the same black uniforms, and when she tried to find her family, all of the main homes were deserted. Katherine decided to head to the US, to warn the other halflings that the magi were starting to get more aggressive.

“We were in Austin to set up a meeting with a family leader. I think the men who hit the motel tapped the phone line somehow. Katherine couldn’t read the men who came for her.” Felix frowned, his face drawing into a deep scowl.

Despite all of his training, he’d failed to protect Katherine. Shortly after she’d been hit by a tranquilizer dart, Felix was also

taken down by a dart. He let the memory play itself out before he continued with his story. "The entire attack happened so fast that none of us had time to think, much less to cast a spell. Katherine was hit by a dart, and she fell over the side of the railing. I was going after her when I got tranqed, and they hit Simone as she was running to check on me."

"They still might have been normal soldiers," Emil said.

"No, not with Katherine's range," Felix insisted. Simone tried to pass him back the joint, and he waved it off. "I'm sure that's the only way they managed to sneak up on us, so I think the men involved were all magi."

He sighed and dropped his head, his face filling with conflicting emotions as he asked, "How much do you know about Katherine Collins?"

Amber grimaced, her disbelieving gaze drifting to Marcus. "And you said that *I'd* fallen in with a bad crowd."

"I've kept up on her story," Emil said. "I'd guessed that she was a berserker, but I never figured out why she went crazy without something else triggering her temper."

"She was a family slayer, actually," Felix said. "We're not sure what set her off either, but with the little information we got after the fact, we think the magi must have drugged her."

"Ah, that makes sense," Emil said. He started to say something else, and then he shot to his feet quickly when he picked up a strange scent in the air.

Felix tensed in his seat as all of the vampires sprang to their feet, their heads craning toward the sky. Amber was up

with them, her mouth hanging open while she panted.

“What is it?” Felix asked, rising from his chair in spite of his full stomach.

“I don’t know,” Emil said. He turned his head, scanning the horizon for anything out of place. “There’s a scent on the wind, something...bloody.”

The vampires were backing away from the table, drawing into protective trios. Acting on their cue, Felix grabbed Simone’s wrist and drew her to his side while he moved closer to Emil, Amber, and Vicky. He was about to search for Marcus, then realized his brother was already behind him.

Marcus was panting, and when Felix looked back, he saw his little brother was trembling. “Marcus, calm down,” he whispered. “It’s probably nothing.”

“It’s getting closer,” Amber whined. She started to pant faster. “Goddess, what is that?”

No one had an answer. The vampires were equally as pensive as the magi, their heads swiveling back and forth while they searched for the hidden threat.

Amber dropped her head, then clapped a hand over her mouth and pointed at the black fluid rolling into the yard through the chain-link fence.

By the time she could squeak a warning, the pool of shadow was in the midst of them, rising up into a humanoid form.

The body and limbs remained glossy black, making the creature appear as if it was wearing a long leather coat and boots. But the hands and face bleached to a white color, and

the bald head elongated slightly before the creature opened his waxy eyelids to reveal twin pools of black.

Light from the kerosene outdoor lamps flickered across the black fluid eyes. The flickering flames made his coat sparkle, and the yellow light flooded his skin, giving it a jaundiced coloring.

The creature turned his head slowly, a smile stretching his white, bloodless lips while he stared down each of the vampires.

“Well, this is a wonder I didn’t expect to find,” he said in a soft hissing voice. “Am I interrupting...a family barbecue?”

Emil stepped out in front of Vicky and Amber. “My name is Emil, and this is my coven. These magi are our friends, and they are under my protection.” He relaxed into a stance. “Who are you?”

“I am Dimitri, and you should stand down, whelp. I’m a wyrm of considerable age, and I could put you down without blinking.”

Vicky drew in a soft, involuntary gasp, pulling Amber against her side. Dimitri’s black eyes locked on her, and he laughed, a dry rasping sound like a pile of leaves rustling in a breeze. “What is this? A mixed partnering? How very modern.” Laughing again, Dimitri waved an invitation for Vicky and Amber to come closer. “Step over here into the light, and show me your partner.”

Vicky tried to resist, but she was being telepathically compelled to move forward. Dimitri’s icy voice was in her head, echoing the command until she complied.

Amber moved with her, also trapped by the impulse. Vicky’s mind nagged, *Why isn’t her blessing keeping him out of her thoughts?*

Once Felix realized that Dimitri was forcing the couple to move, he threw a fireball. Dimitri's hand shot up at the same instant that Felix cast the spell, and the fire sizzled and faded just inches from Felix's outstretched hand.

Dimitri wagged his finger at Felix, though his intent gaze never left Vicky and Amber. "Be good, mage, or I will consume you and your family in a heartbeat."

He knelt down, bringing his gaze level with Amber. "Hello Amber. It's a pleasure to meet you."

His hand settled on her stomach. The fetus pulsed under his hand, and he grinned, revealing two rows of jaggedly pointed teeth. "You're right. It is a boy. He's going to be a real lady-killer."

Dimitri laughed at his weak joke and sat back on his haunches. "There's a storm of wicked thoughts coming my way now, so I guess you're pretty important to everyone here."

Amber felt her jaw relax. She was free to answer. "I'm not really. None of us are in this world. We're just...strays."

Dimitri's smile softened. "Good answer." He raised his hand to lay a finger under her chin. "You love your new family, don't you?"

Amber took the question as a threat. Her blood froze in her veins, and her chest locked tight, preventing her from drawing in even the tiniest breath. He compelled her to answer, and she said, "Yes." Her voice was thick with fear.

"Would you like to stay with them forever?" Dimitri asked.

Vicky shouted, "Amber, no!"

"Yes," Amber replied. "Please don't hurt them."

“No, I won’t touch them. But I want to give you a—a gift, to help you cast off your old life. It’s something you’ll come to appreciate when you’re older.”

Dimitri drew his hand away from her face as he sank the point of his black thumbnail into the tip of his index finger. Impossibly, the fluid which swelled from his finger was bright crimson, though it smelled nothing at all like human blood.

He slid his finger over Amber’s lips, a wet, grotesque decoration that felt icy cold on her skin.

But the scent! The aroma was so inviting, and it made her budding fangs ache with a deep pulsing pain. Her lips curled in, and she lapped at the cool fluid. The ache in her gums faded to a low thrum.

Her mouth felt cold where the film spread, and when she swallowed, the chill sank down her gullet to her stomach. Amber’s mind yammered a panicked thought, *The baby*. But the feeling didn’t spread from her stomach.

Dimitri slipped his split finger between her lips. “This won’t harm the child. You have my solemn oath.”

Amber drew back on the wound, surprised at the flood of cold liquid that filled her mouth. She swallowed again and again, but there seemed to be no staunching of the flow. Her stomach was full, and she had to stop herself.

When Dimitri withdrew his finger, the wound was already gone.

The wyrm rose and turned to regard Emil with a questioning look. “I’ve just recently arrived here, and I’m

looking for some friends. I wonder if you might have seen a black elf escorting a werebear around this neighborhood?”

Emil gaped at him, blinking as though the words were spoken in a foreign language. “You must be mistaken. There haven’t been any druids—”

“He’s not a druid. This werekin is a cursed orc. It’s a long story, and it involved a cub who hadn’t been collared.” Dimitri paused to shake his head. “The orc has been collared, and he’s a new arrival to the Earth plane, though I’m not sure how long ago he showed up with the elf. I’m guessing it was probably four months ago.”

Dimitri glanced back and forth between Emil and Vicky. “Ah, you haven’t seen him, but you still caught his scent.” He laughed at a random thought. “Well, it was good timing, wasn’t it? You running into the werebear brought Vicky and Amber into your coven.”

Emil nodded, unable to relax or let go of the question rattling in his mind like a coin in a beggar’s can. “What did you just feed Amber?”

“Nothing you need to worry about.” Dimitri laughed and added, “Much.”

Before anyone could ask what he meant, his body melted, and the pool of shadow slipped through the grass. His scent vanished just as quickly, leaving the vampires confused and wary.

They were still waiting for Damian to return when Amber dropped to the ground, looking like a marionette whose strings had been cut.

Chapter 13

Friday, November 14, 1997

Amber woke up, first becoming aware of a hand caressing her cheek. The heat pouring out of their palm was almost uncomfortable, and there was something about the scent that wasn't right for a human.

Amber opened her eyes, and in spite of how rotten she felt, she smiled at Jenny, Marcus' alter ego. She smiled because somehow, Marcus had always found a way to change into Jenny while Amber wasn't watching.

As she always had before, Amber marveled at the subtle physical differences between Jenny and Marcus. There was a change in the shape of her eyes, making hers almond shaped while his were more round and open. Her mouth pursed, making her lips rounder, and her shoulders sloped with a feminine curve.

But with her senses being enhanced, Amber could understand for the first time that it wasn't just a change of appearance. Jenny's scent was female, where Marcus was definitely male.

Amber thought of mentioning it, but instead she said, "I was worried that I wouldn't get the chance to see you."

Swiping her long blonde hair out of her face, Jenny returned the smile. But the sentiment was revealed as a lie by the concern in her blue eyes. "I was planning to come out after dinner."

Amber raised up from her bed on her forearms to search

the room. “Where’s Vicky?”

Pointing at the door, Jenny said, “She took off to look for that wyrm.”

“I’ve heard Vicky use the term before, but I don’t think she ever explained what a wyrm was.”

“I don’t know any more than what Emil told me before he left, and I don’t think he knows that much. The wyrm are blood drinkers, but they’re some kind of bodiless lifeform. That thing we saw isn’t its true body. It’s just an illusion the wyrm casts to appear humanoid.”

“So that shadow I saw spilling into the yard was his true form,” Amber guessed.

“I didn’t see anything at all,” Jenny said. She tried to smile again, but she was no more convincing on her second attempt than she had been on her first. “I guess your eyes are getting stronger, now that you’re changing.”

“Yeah, it’s all part of the package deal.” Amber grimaced and tried to swallow away the cold feeling in her mouth. “Of course, there are some disadvantages, like being too eager to sample new bloods.”

“I still can’t wrap my head around you being able to get over your issues with blood so—” Jenny glanced around as the door opened. “She’s awake.”

“I know,” Claudia said, still waiting by the door. “How do you feel?”

“I’m kind of thirsty,” Amber said. “Did Vicky come back yet?”

“No, but neither has anyone else. Jenny and I are the only ones who didn’t rush out to look for trouble.” Claudia’s pensive expression mirrored her worried thoughts, but she forced them away, trying to offer Amber a smile. “I’ll bring you something from the kitchen.”

“No, I can—” Amber tried to sit up, and then she rolled onto her side when her head spun. “Or I can wait here.”

She sank her head back down to her pillow and closed her eyes, so she missed the worried look that Jenny exchanged with Claudia before the vampire backed away from the door.

Jenny returned her attention to Amber, and with nothing else to do, she continued to stroke Amber’s cheek, her eyes and expression both filled with helpless concern.

Amber wanted to tell Jenny not to worry, but she was close to panic herself. All she could think was, *What the hell did I drink?*

Dimitri’s assurance that the unknown blood wouldn’t harm her child carried little weight with her, and it meant even less now that she was huddled on her side, feeling dizzy and limp.

Her throat and stomach felt icy. She couldn’t swallow away the film clinging to her mouth, leaving her with a constant lingering aftertaste. The flavor was pleasant at first, but it was starting to become cloying.

Claudia returned to the room with a tray bearing four bottles. She set the tray on the nightstand and settled on the bed before she pulled Amber up to rest against her side.

Her concerned expression soon shifted into alarm as Amber drained one bottle after another. Amber finished the last and complained, "I'm so cold. Can't you bring me something warmer?"

Lucas wandered in shadows along a highway underpass, his hands stuffed deep into the pockets of his jacket while he brooded to himself. *What's rule number one of a horror movie? Don't split up.*

A second thought brought a smirk to his pale blue lips. *But then again, when it's a vampire movie, doesn't the vampire usually work alone anyway? The only times I've seen a coven in a movie, all the vampires were whiny emos who couldn't stand themselves.*

He conceded that right then, he was feeling a bit like whining himself. After all, the night was going so well before Dimitri showed up to ruin things for everyone.

Lucas had been hoping that he could pull Simone or Felix aside to talk to them, since he'd never met any magi before. He'd been building up an interview in his head, trying to organize all the questions he had about magic.

Instead, he was out hunting for a wyrm, a creature which probably considered him an appetizer. A small appetizer at that.

I don't want no trouble, mister wyrm, he thought, just in case Dimitri was close enough to hear him. *I just want to know what you poisoned my housemate with.*

It was a sarcastic thought, but it was still the truth. Without knowing what Amber had consumed, there was no way to find an antidote. So one by one, the vampires had left the house to search for Dimitri in the hope of getting some kind of answer from him.

Lucas couldn't speak for the others, but he intended to *request* answers, politely, and using "please" to close his statements instead of, "or else."

There was no safety in numbers, or by staying at the house. There was no safety in staying with the magi either. Dimitri was too powerful, and he could wipe out everyone without taking a single scratch of damage.

But the unfair odds weren't what put Lucas in the mood to whine. It was the unfairness of the attack that bothered him, and it was Dimitri's choice of target.

Amber had done nothing, said nothing to provoke the ire of the wyrm. She was the smallest, youngest member of the coven, and the one least able to defend herself. So why choose to pick on the weakest member, when none of them were strong enough for a proper fight?

Lucas thought, *Because he's evil, and sometimes evil people just lash out for no reason.*

He moved away from the highway to search a residential section, and it was several minutes later when he came back to the thought and asked himself if he wasn't evil as well.

But he didn't feel that he was. Humans were big on the concept of preserving a natural balance when it came to lions

eating elks in the wild, and even if they didn't like it, the natural order of the world was that humans were food for vampires.

If Lucas took pleasure in tormenting his victims, *then* his actions *might* be evil. But he favored quick, clean kills when he hunted, and he was willing to compromise and feed from pets to avoid killing too many of the humans.

So he wasn't evil, and while he wasn't exactly good, he was at least morally principled. Which was about the best that any modern day vampire could manage, really.

With his moral guidance systems properly oriented, Lucas brought his thoughts back to the absurdity of his situation. Because, if Dimitri was evil, he probably wouldn't feel any moral obligation to explain himself, and certainly not to a ninety-something whelp.

So, what am I still doing out here? Lucas asked.

He thought of the panic in Vicky's eyes as Emil carried Amber's limp body into the house, and he decided, *One more hour of looking couldn't hurt.*

Vicky panted to sample the air, but there was no sign of Dimitri. Despite her running all over the city, there was no trace of the wrym in the air, nor was there a trail on the ground for her to track.

A wrym. The name conjured up an old memory of her mother, dressed in her drab black schoolmarm dress with a book open in her lap. *The wrym might be considered distant cousins of the vampires according to human scholars, being that they*

are both blood drinking races. But the similarities end there, and a great distinction lies between the two races. The wyrm are mystical shapeshifters who are gifted with shadow magic, and in some cases, with elemental magic. Vampires are neither mystical in nature, nor are they gifted with any forms of magic.

In her memory, Florence looked up from her book. The wyrm were granted entry into Lissand during the great cleansing, but the vampires were left on Earth to fend for themselves. The humans might not make a distinction between us, but the elves did. Despite our long life spans, there is nothing magical or miraculous about us, and the Earth plane is where we belong.

Being only a child, Vicky had declared, I want to see a wyrm.

Florence shook her head swiftly. No you don't. Just because we share a similar diet, it does not make us natural allies. Always remember this, Victoria. No matter how strong you think you are, there's always something else that thinks of you as food too.

Vicky nodded at the memory, and then she asked herself why she was out trying to search for a creature who considered her food. But the answer was all too easy to find. She thought of Amber lying in bed, her body growing colder while her pulse and breathing slowed.

Six hours had passed since she'd left the house, and she still couldn't allow herself to admit that she was running just to keep herself from breaking down and giving in to panic. But the search was a fool's errand, and once she admitted the truth, she gave up and returned to the house.

She found Amber awake, but her relief was short lived when Claudia took her out of the bedroom and toward the stairs to get out of earshot from Amber.

Claudia's face was etched with lines of worry, and she clasped her hands in a sign of agitation that made the panicked animal in Vicky pace restlessly. "She's put down three victims since she woke up, and she's still complaining about feeling cold. I don't like the smell coming off of her at all. She smells like she has a human fever, but she...

Vicky couldn't stand the silence. "What?"

"Vicky, she's as cold as a corpse." Claudia pouted, rubbing her hands together as if she were feeling a sympathetic coldness. "Nothing warms her, and I've had to ask Jenny to leave the room, because Amber is starting to look at her as a potential meal."

Vicky cringed at the revelation. Amber was dying, and she was dropping into a bloodlust so intense that she was losing her self-control to her hunger.

Vicky's voice dropped to a husky whisper. "Could you tell what she's been fed?"

"No. I'll be damned if I can place the scent," Claudia said, turning her head back over her shoulder to glance at the door. "I know it's blood, but it isn't anything from Earth. It has to be something Dimitri brought with him from Lissand. Whatever mystical creature it came from, I don't think it's safe for humans to consume."

Vicky couldn't think of anything then. She couldn't even think to nod an acknowledgement. She walked around Claudia and returned to the bedroom, laying beside Amber.

She draped her arm over her partner, trying not to tremble though she was scared to her wit's end. Amber shivered and moved closer to Vicky. Her body felt wrong for being so cold, and she pressed her arms into Vicky's side, as if trying to warm herself.

Vicky's face squeezed in anguish. She hadn't felt so helpless in a long time, not since losing William. She felt like she was losing Amber, and the causes for both losses were too horribly similar. Vicky was compelled to stand still, unable to fight for the people she loved. For all her strength, she could still be rendered helpless by anyone with telepathic abilities.

Dimitri kept her standing in place while he poisoned her partner. Why?

The question locked away every other thought in her head until Emil opened the door, silently beckoning for Vicky to come with him.

He waited until he was in the den to speak. Charles and Lucas had returned emptyhanded, as had Felix and Simone. Jenny and Claudia sat together on the divan, both of them looking just as lost for answers.

"I've got a hunch that I know what Dimitri did," Emil said as he went to a shelf to scan the titles. "I need to look up some mystical animals first before I can be sure what kind of blood he fed her. But the point might be to change Amber in some way that would render her immortal."

Emil found the book he was looking for and slid it off the shelf, flipping through it while he continued talking. "There are only a handful of creatures whose blood has that kind of property,

but I think it makes sense, given what Dimitri asked Amber.”

Vicky moved to stand beside Emil, trying to read the titles on the shelves. Some of the symbols were familiar to her, but for a few seconds, the language eluded her. Then her memory clicked. “These books are written in daemonic script?”

Emil snorted and cast a disappointed glance at her. “You’ve been here three and a half months, and you’ve only now noticed this?”

Vicky shrugged. “I’m not an avid reader. I used to be, but after my first library went up in flames, I didn’t bother trying to make another.”

Emil nodded and put the book away, his amber eyes skimming book titles again. “These are all copies of books given to me by my father. The copies he gave me were so decayed that I had to make it my first major project. So if the daemonic script looks sloppy, blame me. It’s my handwriting.”

Vicky shook her head. “I’ve only seen a few samples, but your writing looks clean. Where did your father get the books from?”

“He copied them from his father’s books, and his father received them as a gift from Cain.”

Vicky was worried over Amber, which was the only reason she didn’t roll her eyes. Instead, she made an expression of annoyance. “Right, the ‘ancient one.’ I had to figure his name would show up eventually.”

“Typical whelp response,” Emil remarked, then raised his hand to slip another book down from the shelf. “None of you can believe in a vampire surviving forever until you’ve

lived at least five hundred years.”

“It is a pretty thin story,” Vicky said. “I felt that way even as a child, when my father told me stories about him. I always think of Cain as our version of Hercules. We spin legends about how he drained the blood from dragons—”

“But there were dragons on Earth, back when the legends were history,” Emil said. “Now all the dragons live in Lissand.”

“Okay, but you can’t really think this one super-vampire is still alive. Somewhere, he had to slip up and get caught, and then he got killed.” Vicky snorted at his silence. “You won’t tell me, ‘oh ye of little faith?’”

Emil shrugged. “You’ve just dealt with a wyrm, and since it came from Lissand, it can be well over thirty thousand years old. By comparison, Cain would only be sixteen thousand, give or take a century. I’m one thousand, four hundred, and...something, so—”

“You can’t remember your age either.” Vicky allowed herself a thin smile. “I thought it was just me.”

“My point is, I don’t look much older than my late thirties in human terms, and I haven’t aged much aside from a few fine lines forming around my eyes,” Emil said. “So why should Cain’s age be so hard to believe?”

“Maybe I’m just a cynic.” Vicky glanced over his shoulder at the daemonic symbols in the book he was holding. “What are you reading?”

“An entry on unicorn blood.”

Vicky’s face pulled into a skeptical expression. “You don’t think he gave her—”

“No, the symptoms are all wrong,” Emil said. “Unicorn blood would make her immortal, but it would curse her with... with a constant need for blood.” Emil paused and brought his finger back up to the line he’d just read before he looked up at the shelf. “Yeah, that might be it.” His eyes narrowed in frustration a moment later. “Where is it?”

Vicky asked, “Where is what?”

“The third volume in the set. This entry had a mention of a nightmare, but I know that entry isn’t in this volume.”

“A nightmare? As in a bad dream or a horse with a bad attitude?” Vicky asked.

“I’m going with the dark horse as my guess,” Felix said. He got up from the couch and tapped the book he was holding to get Emil’s attention. “This might be what you’re looking for.”

Emil spun his head to glance at the book, his face drawing into an expression of surprise as he nodded. “Yes, that’s it. Can you read daemonic script?”

“No, I was just curious and took a book down at random.” Felix handed him the book and stuffed his hands in his pockets. “Kind of funny how that worked out.”

Emil flipped through the book, his gaze skimming over entries until he found what he was looking for.

While he read, his expression became more confounded. Emil’s eyebrows bunched together while his mouth flattened into a pale slit, and he raised his head to stare at Vicky with a troubled gaze.

“Don’t leave us hanging,” Felix said.

“I think this is it. Nightmare blood can induce bloodlust in vampires, but it’s a poison for humans. It makes them suffer a freezing fever, and the symptoms sound about right from what Claudia told me when I got back.”

“Does your book mention any antidotes?”

Emil shook his head. “No, there aren’t any antidotes. The book recommends seeing a healer to have the blood pulled away magically. But if this is what Dimitri gave Amber, then he was lying when he said he wanted to make her immortal. I’m not sure that makes sense. We didn’t do anything to him, but he attacked one of our people like she’s a mortal enemy.” His frown stretched as he regarded Vicky with confusion filled eyes. “Why?”

“I’ve been asking myself that all night,” Vicky said.

Claudia rushed into the den, her mouth flapping in a sputter and her blue eyes wide with panic. “Amber’s gone!”

Chapter 14

Friday, November 14, 1997

From his left foot, Dimitri extended a tendril of shadow. It wound a path across the carpet and up the wall to unlock the door of the apartment. Compelling Amber to open the door, he withdrew the nebulous limb and took several steps back.

He was being careful to avoid the rays of the morning sun, since even the briefest contact would have been extremely painful, not to mention being potentially fatal.

Waving Amber inside, Dimitri bent at the waist in an exaggerated bow as she stepped into the living room. With the foyer filled with sunlight, Dimitri resorted to urging Amber to shut and lock the door.

He was shorter than he'd been in the yard, and his frame was compressed to fit in the cramped, dark apartment.

Even so, his face was too close when he bowed, and Amber wanted to flinch away from him. But her body wasn't under her own control. Dimitri had driven her out of the bedroom window and sent her running faster than she would have thought her limp legs could carry her.

He had forced her into the apartment, and whatever he was planning, Amber suspected that the human couple in the bedroom wouldn't survive much longer.

“The humans are not your concern yet,” Dimitri waved toward the tacky paisley-purple couch in the living room. “Please, have a seat and rest your head. I’m sure you feel dizzy, but that’s a side effect you’ll have to deal with. You drank two gallons of poison, and the only thing keeping you alive right now is the fetus inside you acting as a filter.” Dimitri paused to laugh. “Of course, the side effect for him is a magically enhanced bloodlust, hence your increased cravings. Even with your child helping, it isn’t possible to leech the poison out of you. The only way to be rid of this is to have someone cast a healing spell on you.”

“Why?” Amber asked, her body flopping back against the couch once he’d released her.

“It’s a question for the ages, to be sure.” Dimitri crossed the room and settled himself on a bright neon green recliner. He propped his boot-covered feet on a wire cable spool that was turned over to be used as an improvised coffee table.

“I poisoned you as a test. I wanted to see what the vampires would do, and they spread out to look for me. The leader of your coven looked up until an hour before dawn, and he intended to question me even if it meant risking his own life. But, he wasn’t trailing that far behind the others, and they all stayed out late.”

Dimitri steepled his fingers under his pointed chin, staring at Amber with unblinking black eyes. “Whether you know it or not, you have that whole coven wound around your dainty fingers like rings, and they’re enchanted with you because you sacrificed your humanity for your partner.”

“Do you have a point?” Amber asked.

“After the child is born, do you believe you can go back to being normal?”

Amber shook her head. “I want to, but if you’re asking me like that, I must be lying to myself.”

“There’s no need to be bitter with me,” Dimitri said. He curled all his fingers except for the index digits and then he turned his hands outward, clasping them together while he pointed at Amber. “You made the choice to drink poison on your own.”

“You manipulated me,” Amber spat, her eyes glowing with an angry fire. “You knew I wouldn’t be able to resist blood on my lips in my condition. I had no more choice than an animal would with a pan full of antifreeze.”

“Amber, a human being would have resisted,” Dimitri said. “Have you given yourself over so completely to your animal side so soon?”

“It’s a lot easier for me than you think. I was losing pieces of my humanity from the moment a daemon killed my family and my best friend. There wasn’t much left to shuffle away from, and the cravings...” Amber lifted her head to look at the bedroom door across the living room. “It’s all too easy to think of them as food now.”

“If I compelled them to come to you, you wouldn’t resist the need to feed, would you?”

“How can I? If I stop eating, I’ll die, and my child will die with me.” Amber glared at Dimitri with unrestrained rage, but even the act of staying angry was draining her. “You’ve cut me off from

my food supply,” She said, panting for air. “You took me away from the coven, even though they were protecting me from my urges.”

Dimitri laughed, his expression filled with amazement. “What a puzzle you are, Amber. I can understand why the vampires would be attracted to you.”

He sat forward in the seat, his expression becoming earnest before he said, “Let me ask you this. Do you think Helen is still going to answer your prayers now that you’ve slid over to the dark side?”

Amber’s scowl melted, her brown eyes filling with an anxious look. At last she understood why Dimitri was able to manipulate her. The blessing that protected her from daemonic possession had been revoked, and without it, she was helpless to defend herself from the wyrm’s telepathic commands.

“I...” Amber closed her eyes and thought, *I’ve lost all my powers.*

“Let me be completely blunt with you.” Dimitri waited until she opened her eyes before he said, “If I leave you alone and send you back to your beloved coven as you are, you will recover from this poison with your coven’s help, and you will go on to deliver your child.”

He paused, and his face shifted subtly, filling with sadness and sympathy at the same time. “But, you will always be cursed. You will always crave blood, and once you return to eating human food, blood will become foul to you again. You will be disturbed by the feeding habits of your child and your partner, and yet, you will still have cravings to join them in feeding.”

“I know,” Amber said.

“Just listen,” Dimitri insisted in a patient voice. “You’ll age, and your body will fail you. None of your vampires can prevent that. They can’t turn you, or grant you their eternal life spans.”

“But you can.”

“I can, and I can give you a knowledge of magic that doesn’t require a connection to your goddess. I can help you to live with your coven forever, or at least until the humans find you and wipe out the entire nest.”

Dimitri held up his hands when Amber’s thoughts churned into anger again. “I’m not threatening to expose them. In fact, all I’m doing is offering you the chance to spend more time with your partner and your child.”

Amber bit her lower lip, rolling it over her dull fangs until the skin began to stretch painfully near the breaking point. “What do you get out of this?”

“Allies,” Dimitri answered without hesitation. “A war is already brewing among some of the mystical races, and more are going to be joining the fight soon. I’m arriving here alone with no one as backup. I should have at least one ally here, but Erick used my training to become very effective at hiding from me.”

Hiding. The word echoed in Amber’s mind. If she had a specialty, it was in hiding.

Her gaze remained cool as she watched the wyrm. He was probably choosing his words carefully in order to keep manipulating her.

Dimitri continued on as though he were unaware of her thoughts. “As allies go, you’re pathetically weak, and you’d need my protection more than I need anything from you. The vampires aren’t much better, but they’ve got strength and speed. You might have been able to help me if you could still perform that nifty locator spell of yours and find Erick for me. But now, you’re worthless to me, except perhaps as a bargaining chip in my negotiations with Emil.”

Amber bit back a bitter remark. Verbal jabs wouldn’t hurt the wyrm any more than a punch would, which was assuming she could stand to throw one. She asked, “What kind of magic can you teach me?”

“I can teach you thousands of spells. In addition to my own experience in shadow magic, I’ve also tapped into the minds of other magic users who could summon elements or perform healing spells. I can’t perform healing magic, but I could pass you the experiences telepathically, and you could try them out to see if you could heal yourself.”

Amber stared at Dimitri with narrowed eyes. “This is another trick.”

“If you say so.”

Amber was silent for a very long time. During her lengthy internal debate, her thoughts wandered to the question of why the couple in the bedroom hadn’t woken up yet. At first she assumed that they were day sleepers. The windows in the apartment were covered in doubled layers of blankets to block out the sun, and the duct tape holding the blankets down was covered in dust.

But she still would have expected them to wake up with Amber raising her voice. She wondered if they were heavy sleepers, and then she realized that Dimitri was keeping them unconscious, just as he had forced Amber to run outside in the early morning light.

There were no clocks anywhere in the poorly furnished apartment, so she had no way of guessing how much time passed before she relented. But it was several hours, and Dimitri never moved or spoke while he waited for her to come to a decision.

He sat forward the moment that Amber nodded and said, “Fine, I accept. You’re going to manipulate me either way, but this way you can claim I made a choice, right?”

“Something like that,” Dimitri agreed.

“So what do I do first?” Amber waved a hand at the bedroom door. “Do you want me to drain them or swear loyalty to you?”

“Neither. For now, I just want you to close your eyes and relax.”

Amber closed her eyes, and something in her head popped. Drowsiness overwhelmed her, and she was out cold a few seconds later.

Chapter 15

Scotland, 1939

Vicky and William had just started to settle into their new home when William's family arrived.

Having fed from yet another intoxicated human, Vicky got home feeling giddy. She was still hypersensitive from an extended bloodlust, and William took advantage of her being in the mood to cuddle. He'd stripped her while he guided her back across the room to the side of their four-post bed, and they made love until just before dawn.

Vicky lounged in a damp patch of his sweat, and William brought a bowl of water and a rag to clean both of them. With the first light of day, he drew the drapes tightly and returned to bed with their nightclothes.

Vicky was just settling into sleep when she was grabbed by her upper arm and yanked out of bed. The arm that William had clasped around her waist held firm for half a second, and then he was flying off the bed in the opposite direction.

Vicky opened her eyes as she flew away from William, but she couldn't make out anything but a blur of dark figures. She shut them again when she slammed onto the floor. Vicky rolled with the impact and tried to get to her feet, but she was still in a half crouch when her body froze.

All around her were men dressed in black. The men all looked frighteningly similar because of their whirling silver irises, and because most of the halflings stared at her with masks of unrestrained hatred that obscured their faces.

It made them appear even more monstrous, and Vicky responded to their hatred by thinking the bloodiest, most hideous diversionary thought she could. She fantasized about ripping the men limb from limb, then shearing their flesh until nothing recognizable was left.

But her angry thought died when she saw William pulled roughly to his feet, and then her fears were laid bare for the halflings to see clearly.

William was pinned in place, held by his upper arms by two men while another, much younger man strode up to William. His hair was dark brown and curly, though it was difficult to appraise his looks with his face frozen in a snarling scowl.

“You were very foolish to return this close to home, William,” he said. “You accepted the role of leadership, and you can’t hide yourself from us.” He waved a hand toward Vicky, though his gaze remained fixed intently on William. “Tell me this isn’t what it looks like.”

“If I’m the leader, I shouldn’t have to—” William was silenced by a hard backhand slap.

“You abandoned the family, so Kyle passed the role to me.”

“Shouldn’t you be happier—?”

The leader struck William again. He reached out to pull

the collar of his thin white nightshirt down to reveal a recent bite wound on his collarbone.

“You’ve allowed her to defile you,” the leader said, his head snapping around before he snarled at Vicky. “He told you our laws, and still you sought to break him.”

It’s a lie! Vicky wanted to scream, but she had no control over her voice. She hardened her glare as she thought, *I love William, and I’ve done nothing wrong by offering myself to him.*

The leader’s eyes narrowed. “Offering yourself?” He rushed across the room and yanked open Vicky’s nightgown, tearing the fabric to expose her chest.

The leader’s eyes froze on the bite wounds covering her shoulders, most of which were almost healed despite being made that night.

The leader’s jaw clenched, and his hand rose before slashing down in a backhand punch. Vicky was held in place, unable to lessen the blow across her cheek. She felt a sharp pop, and her eye welled with tears. Then the blood rushing in her cheek swelled her lower eyelid shut.

The pain was intense, and she wanted to drop to the floor and curl up in a ball. Instead she was forced to stand up.

The leader drew back and slammed another punch into her jaw, then another which flattened her nose. Blood exploded from her nostrils, and still the men invading her mind would not let her scream or pull away. Another blow burst her lips against her teeth, and then another hammered her jaw, breaking the bone in two places.

Her faced numbed, and she lost track of where the hits landed. The flurry of blows continued until the leader laid a punch on her already shattered cheekbone, and the world became grey in her good eye.

Only then did he stop. He panted and kept his fists clenched, as though he were resting before he hit her again.

He said nothing, but the men holding William dragged him away. The rest of the men began filing out of the room, save for two men who leaned against the wall by the window. As the last of their kinfolk folded out, both men pulled back the drapes.

Even the indirect light hurt, and Vicky tried to throw an arm in front of her eyes. She raised her hand an inch, and it was forced back down.

Vicky walked stiffly into the full light of the sun. Her mind begged for her to squint and block out at least some of the painful light. But she was held in place, her eyes wide and her head tilted back to stare at the sun.

Fire tortured her skin, and hot blades sliced her muscles. Her brain reeled from the pain, but she couldn't pass out.

The leader was behind her, his hot, angry breath on her ear. "I know you're thinking of revenge. You plan to rescue William, so let me explain why that would be a mistake."

He stepped back from Vicky and kicked the small of her back. Something broke with a gut wrenching pop, and her legs went numb. Vicky flew through the paned glass, her arms flailing in the burning sunlight. She hit the cobblestone street, and her face split on contact.

Then her mind was released, and she fell into an icy blackness.

Chapter 16

Friday, November 14, 1997

Vicky woke up before the sun set, rising even before Claudia did for her first meal. She was still exhausted, and she suspected that the rest of the coven would likely be getting up late, since no one had gone to sleep until well after ten in the morning.

Moving to the kitchen, she filled the kettle and paced in front of the stove while she waited for the water to boil. Obviously, because she was watching the kettle, the process took longer.

She thought, *How can I find Amber if Dimitri doesn't want her to be found?*

Amber could of course cast a spell to locate anyone, but Vicky had no way to perform a similar trick. She'd asked the magi to try, and none of them were able to perform the spell.

Felix and Simone were perplexed by their inability to summon a deity, since they both had such an amazing degree of control over the elemental forces. But when they called out to Helen, nothing happened.

And Marcus...well, he couldn't cast anything besides a raindrop. He still tried to locate Amber, but the necklace he used as a focal pendulum stayed still unless he waved it himself. Nothing else happened.

It was maddening to know how the spell should be cast, and yet no one she knew could cast it.

Vicky stopped pacing as she realized that she knew at least one other person who might be able to perform the spell. Moving to the den to grab the phone, her memory clutched randomly at different numbers before she remembered the right sequence and started dialing.

Four rings later, the line clicked, and Ellen McCullough asked, “Hello?”

“Ellen? This is Vicky.”

Ellen picked up the note of anxiety in her voice and sighed. “What’s wrong now?”

“Amber’s in deep shit and none of the magi here can cast a locator spell.”

Ellen groaned, falling silent for a few seconds before she said, “All right, start from the beginning.”

Vicky started instead with Dimitri’s arrival at the house, her voice becoming more agitated while she talked. Ellen couldn’t speak after she finished, and Vicky sighed in frustration. “I don’t know where to look for her, and you’re the only other magic user I know.”

“I’ve summoned one daemon before,” Ellen said in a doubtful tone of voice. “That hardly qualifies me as a magic user.”

“I don’t care if you have to summon a daemon or fly here and use a locator spell. I just want to find Amber. If Dimitri gave her nightmare blood, she’s going to be in bad shape, and she’s still got to feed to keep the baby from killing her.”

“Dammit, Vicky, you didn’t mention—” The line was too quiet, as though Ellen had hung up. But finally, she asked,

“What else are you not telling me about Dimitri?”

“He’s a wyrm,” Vicky said.

“Fuck.”

The word coming out of Ellen’s mouth was shocking, and Vicky understood how rattled the halfling was by the revelation. “I’m not suggesting we fight him, so please don’t think I’m planning a battle,” Vicky said. “I need to find Amber, and if Dimitri is somewhere nearby, I want to talk to him.”

“About what?” Ellen asked.

She was shaken and nervous, and Vicky figured that Ellen was probably on the verge of hanging up the phone and walking away quickly. “I don’t know why he became so fixated on Amber, and I...I want answers. Ellen, I know I’ve been nothing but trouble for you, but I’m in a jam, and I don’t know who else to turn to.”

“We’ll have to come to you,” Ellen said. “I can’t summon Annul again without making major problems for the halflings. I’ve already caused enough trouble for my own family as it is.”

Vicky asked, “Who are you bringing with you?”

“My partner Andrew,” Ellen said.

“Your—” Vicky stopped herself, trying to take the tone of surprise out of her voice. “When did you get a partner?”

“A few days after you left town. I’ll tell you all about it once I arrive, but it might be helpful if I know where I’m going, and what I’m walking into.”

Vicky shook her head, feeling frustrated with herself for forgetting even the most basic details. “We’re in San Antonio, and you’re walking into a vampire coven. We’ve also got Marcus’ halfling

brother and a woman who smells like kitsune here for company.”

“Really.” Ellen sounded intrigued. After a much shorter pause, she said, “All right, Andrew is already packing for us. I’ll get us on the next flight out, even if I have to compel two people to get off the plane.”

Amber woke up with a burning fire in her lower stomach and a spear of frost shoved down her throat. Her limbs felt heavier than before, and she hadn’t changed positions from where she slumped after Dimitri let her go.

The wyrm hadn’t moved from where he sat on the ugly green recliner either, and he remained hunched over, as motionless as a marble sculpture.

He smiled when her eyes flicked up to meet his. “Breakfast?”

Fuck you, Amber thought, but her throat was too dry and cold to make the words come out. *Get out of my head.*

“Oh, you can’t keep me out anymore, now that your magic blessing is gone,” Dimitri said. “The moment you swallowed that single sip of human blood from Emil’s cup, you lost the protection of your goddess.” His smirk became a grin. “Now, would you prefer to eat or starve?”

You know I can’t refuse. I’d be dead in a few hours.

“No, you’ll last a few days, actually.” Dimitri straightened up and looked toward the bedroom door. “But you won’t refuse, because they’re just meat to you.”

In the bedroom, a frightened sob rose from the woman first, and then the man woke up and cried, “Jane! What’s happening?”

“I don’t know!” Jane wailed. “Help me!”

“I can’t move!” the man said, panic making his voice shrill. “Jane!”

The door opened, and Jane walked out stiffly, her frightened brown eyes meeting Amber’s before she screamed. Her terror was all-consuming, draining her sanity even as she was pulled to the couch against her will.

Amber scowled helplessly while the woman dropped to her knees and leaned toward Amber. Dimitri was leaving Jane control of her voice and expression to put her terrified emotions on full display. He wanted Amber to see Jane’s frightened reaction to her presence. Dimitri wanted Amber to know that she’d already become a monster.

The woman’s shrieks ended abruptly, and Dimitri said, “Yes, now you see.”

The woman didn’t notice him, and Amber realized he was compelling her to ignore him. *What other point is there?* Amber thought, her eyes still locked on Jane. *I know what I’ve become, so why rub it in?*

“I’m making a point to you, Amber. I would kill this woman quickly, and with little pain. So would you. But that does not make us good. It is a slight courtesy offered, a decision not to play with our food, but it does not change what we do. Thus, we are both evil.”

Is that what this is about? You want to recruit me by

convincing me that I'm evil? Amber shook her head. *Maybe I am, but I'm not so evil as to poison potential allies.*

"No, you just fuck them like a common whore," Dimitri said.

Amber snorted bitterly, then swallowed and tried to find her voice. She couldn't, so she thought, *You say that, but I haven't got into my partner's pants. I have her loyalty and love without resorting to tricks. I haven't had to touch Claudia or her partner to earn their respect, and Lucas considers me physically repulsive even now that I'm carrying all this extra muscle mass. But, I still have his trust without hopping in his bed.*

Dimitri fell silent, nodding to himself. "You make very good points." The woman leaned closer to Amber, and Dimitri waved an invitation. "Perhaps you'll feel differently after you've fed."

Amber clasped the woman's rigid arms to pull herself up from the couch. Amber was slumping over to bite into the woman's neck when Dimitri gave Jane control of her vocal chords, and then she whimpered, "Please, don't—"

"I'm sorry, Jane," Amber whispered. She thought, *It's nothing personal.*

But she didn't say it. Dimitri was right, and she was willing to offer her meal the courtesy of a quick death.

She tilted her head and bit down. Her teeth weren't sharp enough to tear the flesh, and she had to twist her head while Jane keened in pain. The skin stretched, then a flap snapped away with a grotesque popping sound. Jane's keening became a full throated scream.

Pushing her cheek around the flap, Amber closed her lips over the hot jet of blood spurting from the woman's neck. The freezing cold in her mouth abated instantly, and Amber drew deeply from the wound, feeding in greedy gulps to thaw out her stomach.

The taste of the blood was much more intense with terror blended into the hot fluid. The cold syrup at home was given by pets who had no fear for their vampire masters. But Jane was petrified, and her terror was like a chili-seasoned salsa, adding a whole new layer of intense flavor to Amber's first live meal.

Still, it wasn't enough. The feeling of cold was returning already, and the burning in her stomach faded by only the slightest amount. Amber pushed away the body and rested her elbows on her thighs to keep from folding over in half on the couch.

Her face and neck were splashed with blood, and she didn't need to look back to know the couch, the wall, and part of the ceiling were painted by her clumsy bite.

"More?" Dimitri asked.

"What do you think?" Amber glared at him. "You want me to see proof of what I am? Fine!" She waved her hand at the body. "There she is; sweet, innocent Jane, who I just dubbed breakfast." She took a breath and glanced at the door. "What's his name?"

"John," Dimitri said.

Amber shook her head. "He's just a second serving to me."

Chapter 17

Saturday, November 15, 1997

Claudia rubbed her stomach while she sat in the den beside Marcus. Almost everyone else was pacing, which was causing magi to walk into the paths of vampires. Tempers were flaring, and the house felt like a powder keg which would explode soon.

Claudia wanted to leave and search for Amber herself, which was why she kept rubbing her stomach. She was so close to being due, and it would be madness to leave when she could go into labor at any second.

Emil continued to read, though it was clear from his tortured expression that he was getting nothing useful on tracking a wyrm. He refused to give in to his nervous energy, while most of the whelps were the exact opposite. They stalked the room, looking like sharks who couldn't remain still.

But among all of them, Vicky was the most active. She moved from the window to check outside, and then to the phone to stare and will it to ring. She would wander to the fireplace and pace in front of it, but no matter where she went, she wouldn't stop moving.

Lucas and Charles stayed close to Emil, and their shorter circuits frequently put them in Vicky's path. She would snarl and move away each time, her fists clenching while she tried to calm herself.

As she turned her back, Charles nodded toward Vicky while his eyes pleaded with Lucas, *Tell her to calm down.*

Lucas scowled and shook his head before pointing at Vicky. *No, you do it.*

They wouldn't, nor would anyone else, and the routine was repeated at every near collision.

It was easy to understand why Vicky was strung out with worry, but trying to calm her would only shift her ire onto a hapless target who didn't deserve to be chewed out...or chewed upon, depending on how angry Vicky got.

Claudia had another idea. She stood up and cleared her throat. "I propose a hunt."

Vicky shook her head, her pacing taking her back to the window to look out into the side yard. "I don't think I can find Dimitri or Amber unless he wants me to."

"No, I meant a hunt for meals." Claudia smiled at the incredulous glares aimed in her direction. "You're all just begging for a fight right now, and if you stay cooped up like this, something is going to go wrong fast."

Vicky pointed at the phone. "But we're waiting for—"

"The magi can man the phones in case Ellen calls to ask for a ride from the airport" Claudia said. "But the rest of us need to get outside."

Charles was rigid and angry as he shook his head. "You're not going anywhere, Claudia."

"When did I give you the right to order me around?" Claudia asked. Her smile remained, but in her voice, a hard edge warned that he was treading on thin ice. "Now, if we all spread out, we might end up with a meal, a chance to find Amber, or a chance to find Dimitri."

But if we stay in here, all we do is get on each other's nerves."

"You're not traveling alone," Charles said, though the commanding note was gone from his voice. Instead he was pleading with her. "We can hunt together."

"No, I'll be hunting with Vicky," Claudia said.

"Why?" Vicky asked.

Claudia said, "Because if we run into Dimitri, I have to make sure you won't do or say anything to get yourself killed."

Amber shook her head and gave up, heaving a sigh at Dimitri's angry expression. "What? I tried out your spell, and I can't heal myself. So now what have you got in mind?"

Dimitri shook his head, his eyes raised to stare at the ceiling while he mulled his thoughts. "You had enough halfling to carry a vampire child, so I thought you would be able to cast...maybe you're lacking the focus to heal yourself while you're still sick from the poison."

Amber sighed. "This is a hell of a time for you to think of something obvious."

Dimitri nodded and got up from the recliner. He held out his palm and cast a scrying shadow to check the time in Lissand, and he scowled as he saw that dawn was swiftly approaching in the elvish plane of existence. "Amber, I must leave now, and I won't be back to feed you. I suggest you use the telephone to contact the coven and have them clean up this mess for you."

Amber wanted to hurl an insult at him, but the sudden flash of light above the wyrm's head blinded her and forced her to bury her face against the couch cushion. When she looked back, he was gone, and she was left alone.

Alone with two bodies, and their blood smeared across her face. It was streaked in her hair, and stained in the fabric of her shirt. The only thing that might make the case easier for the police is if she started writing her confession *before* they arrived.

Amber wondered if anyone called the cops over Jane's screaming, or over John's angry cries after he saw his girlfriend lying dead on the floor. If someone called the cops, how long did she have before they busted down the door?

But the poison made it almost impossible to move. Her limbs were wet rags she could barely lift, and her mouth and throat were already feeling coated in ice again. The burning in her stomach felt less intense, but her child was far from satiated.

She thought of Dimitri telling her she had days left to suffer, but she no more believed that statement than anything else he'd said. She knew the burning could consume her tiny well of strength and leave her incapacitated long before she died. Then her child would starve once he'd depleted the last of her blood.

It was that thought, the idea of her child starving to death, which motivated her to roll off the couch. Amber hit the floor on her shoulder, grunting at the shock of pain that lanced from the joint up to her spine. Her legs flopped over Jane, and in front of her, the path to the kitchen was blocked by John's body.

Amber chose to drag herself around the cable spool coffee table to avoid the cold corpse, but she regretted it when her bare legs scraped over the rough wood.

A long splinter bit through her thigh, and she thought, *It would figure. The one time I decide to wear shorts, all hell breaks loose.* She uttered a weak laugh and added, *That will teach me for bucking a trend.*

Vicky walked with her head down, hands stuffed in her pockets while she huffed. She was angry, but her odd breathing pattern had nothing to do with her emotions. She was searching desperately for any hint of Amber's scent in the air.

She could smell a pair of homeless bums in the alleyway up ahead, and she was momentarily grateful when she glanced at Claudia questioningly, and the vampire wrinkled her face in disgust.

But then Claudia's rejection of an easy meal brought Vicky's anger surging back, and her scowl returned. "We aren't really out to hunt tonight, are we?"

"No, and I don't believe we'll find Amber either. But you're about to explode and take someone's head off. So if you're going to vent, I prefer it would be me who has to deal with you."

Vicky stopped walking and snarled, "You idiot! If you wanted to have me rant, why not just pull me off to a room upstairs? For fuck's sake, Claudia! You're about to pop, and we shouldn't be outside."

The look on Claudia's face shifted subtly to hunger, and she started walking toward the alley up the street. Vicky jogged after her. "What are you doing?"

"I'm changing my mind."

Vicky frowned when Claudia slid a knife out of her purse. The scene was disturbingly surreal; Claudia, a pregnant woman in a loose black dress that billowed around her swollen stomach. Slung across her shoulder was a black canvas bag, and in her hand, a butterfly knife, the brass handles still folded over the blade. Etched on her face was a look of hunger that grew more intense as she drew closer to her prey.

Recognition dawned on Vicky, and she tried to grab Claudia's hand. "Whoa, wait a—"

Claudia lifted her hand, then twisted her wrist to crack the top of Vicky's middle knuckle with the knife. "Be quiet," she hissed.

The bums were sleeping soundly. They never had a chance as the vampires crept upon them. Vicky took out her switchblade and clicked it only once she was set to pin the man down. She grabbed his throat and lifted him up. Then she slammed the man down, splitting his skull on the pavement.

Laying on his back, the bum's blood rushed out of his throat the instant she vented his jugular, and she had to sink down quickly to avoid losing most of her meal.

She couldn't go into bloodlust while she fed. She had too much to worry over. Claudia's sudden hunger was a sign of her body preparing for labor. Which meant they only had a few minutes to return home before Claudia's fluids burst. That

would be a lot of vampire DNA left not far from the scene of a suspicious pair of murders.

No, this is only the pair we're leaving behind, Vicky corrected herself.

All over the city, the vampires were hunting, taking meals to vent their frustrations over a situation they had no power to change.

But things were about to get much worse.

Claudia drew away from her victim, her skin flushing a soft blue color before she grimaced. “Yep, that’ll do it.” She waved her hand for Vicky to come closer. “Help me to the dumpster, and hurry.”

Vicky guided Claudia, walking behind the shorter vampire while she held the panting woman by her upper arms. Claudia pulled away from Vicky’s grasp to rend the padlock off the sliding door on the side of the dumpster. She slid back the door and snapped her head around, her nose wrinkling at the scents of rotting human food.

Hiking the hem of her dress, Claudia turned to settle herself on the edge of the dumpster. “Go toss those two in a dumpster farther up the alley.”

Vicky nodded and took off running. Claudia would let her fluids break into the dumpster, where no one would notice the odor. The garbage men wouldn’t notice the bodies until several other trash collections, and the discharge would be mixed in with the rest of the refuse in the truck by then.

That was assuming anyone saw the bodies.

Vicky dropped the bums into the dumpster and piled bags of garbage around over the bodies. She decided to transfer more bags from other dumpsters and make sure the two were covered. But even after she was sure they couldn't be seen, worry chewed her nerves like a frenzied animal.

She's taking too many risks for nothing, Vicky thought.

Behind her, Claudia's voice raised in a blood-freezing screech. The first labor pains were starting.

Amber panted into her forearms, resting though she'd barely pulled herself two or three feet through the living room at most.

She thought, You know, Helen, it's days like this when I'm almost ready to ask, 'why me?' I mean, I can see how I might deserve to be lying here. I drank human blood, so that makes me a liquid cannibal. I'm not so sure why you sent the daemon after me.

But what's really bothering me is, why do you always have to kick my ass with something bigger and older than me? Just once, couldn't you send a baby brownie to attack me? Or, or maybe a pixie? Just one, though. I seem to recall they're deadly in hordes.

She finished the unorthodox prayer with a half sincere *Amen*, and then she pushed her arms out to drag herself closer to the kitchen.

She pulled herself until her arms were under her face, then flung them out again. She repeated the process a third time, and her vision doubled. Amber turned her head to check her progress and decided she'd made another foot.

Oh come on, snails can move faster than this, she thought angrily.

But her flaring temper couldn't grant her additional energy, and she had to rest again. Dimitri's words drifted through her memory, a reminder that she voluntarily ingested poison just because it tasted good. But as she thought about it, she recalled how his question implied that he was feeding her something to make her immortal. More proof of his lies.

As if she needed more.

Amber set her hands on the carpet, and her nail caught a snag, folding the fingernail back over onto the nail bed. Amber hissed and drew her hand back under her chest while she made a fist to squeeze away the hot stabbing pain.

Hell with this, she thought and pushed herself up onto her hands. Her legs wobbled when she pushed her hips up from the floor, and then her view of the world stayed doubled. She tried to blink it away, and her hands quadrupled below her before the color drained from her vision.

Amber pitched forward, landing hard on her nose and chin. She didn't feel a thing.

Vicky pushed open the door and stumbled into the house. Claudia was probably uncomfortable running with her arm up over Vicky's neck, and with Vicky's hand clamped over her mouth.

But Vicky didn't have much choice. Claudia's cries were bound to scare someone into calling the police, and the only safe place for her to deliver her child was in the soundproofed walls of the coven house.

Felix and Simone raced into the foyer, both of them looking on with anxious expressions once Claudia's mouth was uncovered.

Her shrieking bought Marcus out of the guest room and to the top of the stairs. "What's wrong with her?" he shouted.

"She's gone into labor." Vicky yanked her head away from a louder screech, then started moving up the stairs. She was halfway up when the phone started ringing. "Felix, get that! If it's any of the coven checking in, you know what to tell them!"

All of Vicky's concerns for Amber had to be pushed aside. No one else was on hand to help Claudia through her labor. The magi couldn't come near her in her condition. Being so badly in pain, Claudia would lash out at them without thinking.

Felix stood at the door. "It's Ellen. She's at the airport." He had to repeat himself, shouting to be heard over Claudia's screeching.

Vicky clamped her hand over Claudia's mouth, and then drew in a hissing breath when Claudia gnashed her teeth against Vicky's palm. "Then you'll have to go pick her up. That is, unless you want to take my place here."

Felix shut the door without a word. Only a few seconds later, she heard the front door shut.

Vicky decided it was good timing after all. She could get rid of the magi on an important task instead of telling them to boil water.

Amber woke up, gasping for air before she opened her eyes. Raising her head, she saw the kitchen floor was almost within her reach. All she had to do was stretch out just a bit farther, and she could pull herself in.

Only then did she ponder the trivial matter of getting up to search the counter for the phone. It wasn't mounted on the wall, but it had to be...Amber laughed at herself. *Who told me where the phone was? Next question: why did I believe him?*

Still, she raised her arms and started pulling herself into the kitchen. There was nothing else to do by then but check.

Amber opened a cabinet door and used the shelves to pull herself up to a sitting position. She had to rest for a long time before she could reach for the drawer to slide it open, and the effort of pulling herself to lean on the cabinet with her bruised chin on the countertop was almost enough to drop her back into another unintentional nap.

She was so thirsty, and the blood in the living room was still damp enough to make her think of looking for puddles. Amber shook the temptation off. She was already too drained to make the trip back.

More proof of Dimitri's lies.

But the phone was on the counter. The spiral cord snaked across the counter next to the wall, trailing right up to the edge without looping over. Of course. If it had fallen over, Amber would have known where to pull herself up. Instead, she was on the wrong side of the counter.

She closed the cabinet, and then the drawer before she hefted her arms over the top of the counter. She began scrabbling her arms to pull herself up until she was bent over, her cheek pressed into the icy formica while she stared at the phone.

Her vision blurred. Amber's mouth tightened in a thin line, and she closed her eyes, thinking of Vicky. *She wouldn't give up.* Amber forced her eyes open and slid her arm out to grasp the phone.

But when she lifted it from the cradle, there was no dial tone. The buttons of the phone wouldn't light up, though the cord in the base was connected to the wall.

Amber dropped the phone and let herself slide off the counter. Crumpling to her knees, she rolled back on the floor and cracked the top of her head at the base of the cabinets doors on the opposite side of the cramped kitchen.

Stars danced in front of her vision, but she wouldn't close her eyes to clear them. She couldn't give up. Maybe the

jack was just bad. Maybe if she tried in the bedroom...

Amber's vision cleared, and she was looking at the refrigerator door. More specifically, she was looking at a red stamped message on a bill.

The message read: **PAST DUE**, and once her eyes could focus enough to see the smaller print, she confirmed it was the phone bill.

There was no help coming.

Chapter 18

Saturday, November 15, 1997

Rather than hunt, Charles decided to visit with his pets, taking little sips until he was able to calm the animal growling in his chest. He hoped he would be the first to arrive home by taking his meals quickly.

But when he opened the door, the scent of his partner told him all he needed to know. He was right, and she was wrong.

Sure, and that's just what I'll tell her, Charles thought as he rushed through the front door and slammed it behind himself. He sprinted up the steps, his face caught between two emotions while anger and fear warred inside his head. But he wouldn't let either have complete control. Before he could worry about saying "I told you so," he had to help deliver his son.

Charles thumped open the door of his bedroom with his shoulder, moving quickly to the bed to help Vicky. "How long has she been in labor?"

"Half an hour," Vicky said, then grabbed Charles' wrist while she pulled her ravaged hand away from Claudia's mouth.

Charles clamped his hand over his partner's mouth without further prompting. His face tightened in a grimace when she tore this skin away from his palm. "Thanks for standing in for me."

"I'm going downstairs for some bottles."

“I knew it,” Charles gasped, unable to keep from complaining to Vicky, who was still clear headed, at least. “Of course Claudia would send us out before she went into labor.”

“It might have been instinctual,” Vicky said, pausing at the door to add, “My mother said sometimes, there’s a bad bloodlust before labor, and I think Claudia was harboring a craving for a hot meal. Everything else she said was just excuses made up by her conscious mind to put a nice face on her subconscious needs.”

“Right, in other words, typical female behavior,” Charles said, his grimace pinching tighter when Claudia sliced a chunk of meat away from his palm. “I guess there is one benefit to her plan. Since I’ve fed recently, my hand should heal faster.”

Vicky stared down at the mangled lump of bloody meat at the end of her wrist. “I’ve fed, but this may require an extra bottle to speed things up.”

“Yeah, go on, I can take care of her for now,” Charles said.

Vicky made it into the middle of the main hall before she smelled the magi returning with Ellen and a male halfling, she guessed Ellen’s partner, Andrew.

The door opened, and Felix walked in first. Behind him, Ellen looked no worse for wear from her travels. Her dark reddish blonde hair was frazzled, but that was how it normally looked, as did the wrinkled condition of her blue T-shirt and ankle length forest green hoop skirt.

Andrew wore dark blue jeans and a grey shirt that fit snugly over his lean frame. A duffle bag was slung by long straps over his right shoulder, and in his left hand was another bag; Ellen's, judging by the scent.

Andrew was perhaps a quarter of an inch taller than Ellen, and while his muscles were defined enough to give him a masculine appearance, his frame was just as delicate as Ellen's. In short, they looked made for each other.

His green eyes were a darker shade, and like most halfling men, his round cheeks were a barren plain where no facial hair could grow. His curly hair was shaggy, and fell in overlapping ringlets to cover his neck, his ears, and most of his brow. The softening effect of his hair framing his face made him look angelic.

Vicky nodded to Felix when he closed the door behind Simone and Marcus. "You've got great timing. I need an extra hand." Vicky raised her arm. "I've almost lost this one."

Felix paled, his mouth falling open as he nodded. But he still reacted better than Marcus, who swooned and fell against Simone.

"Wimp," muttered Simone.

"Just tell me what to do," Felix said.

"All of you follow me into the kitchen. Felix, if you and your partner will lower your guard for Ellen—"

Ellen cut her off. "They already did back at the airport." She dropped her bag by the door and followed behind Vicky while she said, "Don't the two of you know how to avoid trouble? If it isn't a mage or a daemon, it's vampires and a wyrm."

“Why are you including the covenant?” Vicky asked. “They haven’t caused any trouble.”

“They haven’t?” Ellen’s expression became incredulous. “Vicky, what do you call a vampire baby, if not trouble?”

Vicky opened the refrigerator and leaned over to check the stock. She frowned at the dozen bottles remaining. No one could think about calling volunteers, and even if they could, Claudia sent everyone for a night out.

Ellen waited for her to speak, then gasped in frustration. “Vicky, you should know better too. You’ve been—”

“This wasn’t my choice, all right?” Vicky shouted, rising up to glare over the door at Ellen. “Amber took it in her own head that this was something she wanted, and Claudia...she’s always full of good ideas.”

“You should have—”

“Is there ever a time when you can convince your partner not to do something once he’s made up his mind?” Vicky waited, then nodded at the silence. “That’s right, she’s my partner, and I couldn’t stop her once she got the idea from Claudia. She’s doing it because she feels like she owes me for taking away my ability to have a child.”

Ellen remained quiet, and Vicky leaned over to take out a bottle. She passed it to Felix, and then another one before closing the refrigerator. She couldn’t take a bottle for herself to help heal her hand. The stock that remained would need to be conserved, because Amber would likely be famished by the time Ellen found her.

If she can— Vicky started to think, but she wouldn't let the thought finish.

Ellen listened to Vicky's swirling thoughts, her deep frown of disapproval slowly fading as understanding came to her. She let go of a long breath and said, "If I'm supposed to attempt this spell, I'll need a map and a pendulum."

"The map is set up in the den. Marcus can show you where." Vicky frowned at Felix. "Sorry, but I need you to be a gopher. You'll be fetching more bottles as we need them, but wait at the door, and don't go anywhere near the bed."

Lucas was the only vampire to take his car, a black BMW with darkly tinted windows. He wandered around downtown with both of the side windows rolled down, following people randomly before he came up with an excuse each time for why he didn't feel like eating them.

He didn't have much of an appetite while he was worrying about Amber, and so every imperfection was used; too short, too thin, too drunk. But when he turned down a healthy and athletic male for being too Jewish, Lucas knew he was just being picky. He was definitely not in the mood to go hunting.

He decided to go visit his new pets, the Colby sisters, since a half a meal was all he could stand for the night. Charles was right, and sipping from the three was almost like draining a single victim.

Then there was the fact that Lucas enjoyed the creepy way in which the sisters spoke and moved together. He didn't know if it was natural or an act, but they were fascinating to watch once they started rambling in unison.

His thoughts wandered from the sisters, but they drifted without resting on any one worry. He barely noticed the speedometer creeping up until the engine maxed out and whined in protest. Lucas backed off the pedal and mentally scolded himself to relax. Until Vicky's friend showed up to try out her own hocus pocus, there was nothing to do but wait.

Pulling up to the two story house of the three sisters, Lucas put on a false smile and went to the door.

Instead of one of the sisters, an old man opened the door, his face pulling into a look of disdain the instant he saw Lucas.

"Boyfriend?" the old man asked.

Lucas shook his head. "No, sir, I'm a talent manager for a local goth-punk-fusion band, the Bleeding Screammers."

"Never heard of them," the old man said.

"They haven't signed a label yet, but we're shooting a music video. I was looking for Lisa, Patricia and Monica, since they agreed to help with the production." The old man started to say something, and Lucas held up his hands in a placating gesture. "Sir, I swear, they will be used tastefully."

Ellen unclasped the nickel plated necklace and nodded as she listened to Simone's thoughts. "I think I know what you're doing wrong. You tried to pray to Amber's deity instead of your own."

Simone blinked, her silver eyes filling with an incredulous look. "Wait, you mean if I summoned Gaia instead—"

"The spell probably would have worked," Ellen said. "Just let me try out my own version, and we'll let you try if my spell doesn't work."

No one spoke as she held up her necklace. The tiny copper cross pendant dangled over the map, clattering on the end of the chain.

Ellen typically preferred silver, but the metal was frowned up by vampires, who had an allergy to the metal. They had no trouble with religious symbols, but bringing silver jewelry into the coven house was comparable to showing up at a human home with a dead rat as a housewarming gift.

She took a long breath and prayed, "Heavenly father, I am your vessel and humble servant, and I ask for your guidance and help if it is your divine will to intervene. I'm looking for Amber McKenzie. If she's alive, please point out her location to me, and help me to seek her out, no matter where she might be hidden."

The cross tightened the chain against Ellen's fingers, drawing it out into a slant. Ellen moved her hand until the cross dipped, and the chain became a vertical line. Marcus leaned over to mark the point with a pencil. "Don't bother," Ellen said.

“Did you memorize the address?” Marcus asked.

“Not exactly,” Ellen said. But she offered no other explanation before she got ready to leave.

Vicky stared at her bandaged hand during the ride in Felix’s rental car. Ellen’s version of the locator spell was different, because she didn’t go into a trance the way Amber did. Ellen said only that she had tried something different, and she didn’t speak during the trip.

Vicky caught her glaring in the rearview mirror, and she didn’t need to guess why the halfling was angry. Only after going over Marcus’ thoughts did Ellen find out who the father of Amber’s baby was. So she was quite understandably furious with Vicky both for hiding the truth, and for allowing Emil to breed with Amber.

Ellen was upset because she’d been used by her family, bred to a mage slave who had no mind of his own. The traumatic memories of her youth were made worse, because Ellen was herself the product of a breeding between a halfling and a slave. Like most hybrids, Ellen never learned which of her elders was her mother.

Ellen could not be convinced that Amber made her decision willingly. Vicky knew the truth, that Amber made the choice to have a vampire child without considering all of the risks. But even if the vampires had explained in excruciating detail, Amber still would not have been swayed.

Once Amber reached that point, Vicky didn't want her to back down either. She wanted to have a child, and the changes Amber went through pleased Vicky just as much as they scared her.

But Vicky couldn't think straight to explain Amber or herself, and so she avoided Ellen's dirty looks rather than argue.

Ellen made a frustrated sigh in the front seat. "I can forgive you for letting this happen, but you need to tell me what you're planning. I don't have the first clue of how to handle a wyrm."

"I think talking in a low voice is probably the safest option," Vicky commented. "I'm sorry, but I don't have a plan for dealing with Dimitri besides asking why he's doing this. I just want to find Amber, all right?"

Ellen let Vicky go back to her thoughts, saying nothing while she completed the trip to the apartment complex. But when she parked in front of the building, her face drew into a clouded look of anxiety.

She turned in her seat to look back at Vicky, her silver eyes filled with an anxious light. "I can sense Amber, but the rest of the building is empty."

Vicky opened the door and unfolded herself from out of the back seat. She was drawing in breath heave a relieved sigh when she picked up the faint trace of dried human blood.

Ellen picked up her thought and started walking toward the building entrance at a fast jog. Vicky was on her heels only a second later.

Guided by her deity, Ellen turned in the corridor and reached out to try the door. She found it locked, and she stepped back to let Vicky shoulder it down. The halfling's gaze followed Vicky until she spotted the woman's body on the floor.

A stunned whimper rose from Ellen's lips as she staggered into the room behind Vicky, who stood staring at the splashes of blood painting a wide section of the living room.

"What did he make her do?" Vicky asked, forcing her legs to work again. Amber's scent was close, and the odor of sickness rolling off her body was much stronger. She found Amber sprawled across the kitchen floor, and she dropped to her knees, grabbing Amber's arms to shake her gently. "Amber can you hear me?"

Amber's eyelids fluttered, then drew back slowly. Her lips pulled into a tired smile. "You came." She closed her eyes and muttered, "Knew you would."

Emil returned home, and the mingling odors in the air confirmed that he'd missed everything by going out. Like Charles and Lucas, he gave up on the idea of hunting, but he'd taken much longer to decide on visiting his pets to feed.

He went upstairs to check on Amber first, finding most everyone in her room. Vicky moved away from the bed, her blue eyes troubled while she described the condition of the apartment, and the bodies of the two unfortunate occupants. She continued with Ellen's observations about the entire building being empty.

Emil sat down on the side of the bed and leaned over to touch Amber's cheek. She was cold, and she stared up at him with a bright sheen of fevered delusion in her eyes. Her breathing was soft, and rushed out of her far faster than she inhaled.

Vicky finished with an explanation of how short the blood supply was, and she was near panic when she finished.

Emil rose from the bed and closed his arms around her. "Calm down. She's back home, and I'll take care of her."

"But she—he made her—"

"I know, but you have to let it go. What can any of us do to a wyrm?"

Vicky sighed and stepped away from him, her gaze moving back to Amber. "What can we do to save her?"

"We can keep her fed, at least." Emil nodded to Lucas. "Get on the phone and call Dr. Mooney. Tell him we need to make a withdrawal, and take whatever he'll let you get away with. Aim high with your first bid." He grabbed Vicky's wrist and pulled her toward the door. "We've got to go back to the apartment and take the heads."

Vicky wanted to object, but she followed Emil out of the house, feeling grateful that he kept pace with her. She saw the logic of his plan. As the rest of the building was emptied, probably by Dimitri, the two bodies would be just another odd statistic, so long as there weren't bite marks to examine or match up.

Emil walked into the apartment, cringing as he looked around. "Oh hell, this must have been fun to watch. It looks like a toddler got fed their first meal."

Vicky followed him into the kitchen, watching him dig through the drawers for a big knife. “Who’s Dr. Mooney?”

“He used to be a pet back in his college days, but now he runs a local blood and tissue center. We run the pets who don’t feed us through the clinic every few months, which gives us some credit to make withdrawals if we’re having an emergency.”

“When was the last emergency?” Vicky asked.

Emil pulled a meat cleaver from the bottom drawer and slammed it down on the counter to test the heft. “Claudia went into a week-long feeding frenzy, and we couldn’t keep the refrigerator stocked fast enough to keep up with her and still feed ourselves. She hit four victims a day for six days straight.”

Vicky nodded. “So it’s a boy.” She grimaced at another thought. “If Amber survives the poison, she’s still not up to her first frenzy yet.”

Emil said nothing to acknowledge he as he walked out of the kitchen and knelt beside the man’s body. He slung down the cleaver, taking the head and neck in one chop. The wound was flush with the shoulder, the blade struck so accurately that it passed between two vertebrae.

Emil handed Vicky the head and moved to the woman next. He decapitated the body and returned to the kitchen with a casual stride. Setting the head on the counter, he grabbed a towel hung over the stove handle and wiped down the cleaver while he panted and sampled the air. Then he moved around the kitchen, wiping down everything Amber had touched.

He became calmer while he worked, and by the time he retrieved the head and walked to the door, his expression was cool and relaxed.

Back at the house, the heads were wrapped in bags before they were stored in the deep freezer in the garage. Emil divided the last bottles between Amber and Claudia, and then he went to the den to wait for Lucas to return.

Vicky knelt down in front of him, watching his face with a worried expression. He was too calm, giving away nothing from his thoughts through his slack expression. She asked, “What are you thinking?”

“That I should have skipped dinner,” said Emil. “Please, just relax until Lucas gets back. If you’re worried that I’ll ask you and Amber to leave, don’t.”

Vicky’s shoulders sagged, relieved to have her worst fears invalidated. She stared at the floor with a miserable expression. “She’s dying.”

Emil’s hand cupped her cheek, pulling her head up. His face was full of sympathy as he said, “I have a plan, but it depends on how much blood we can get from Dr. Mooney.”

It was almost an hour before dawn when Lucas arrived hauling in two blue plastic ice chests. He didn’t bother setting them down. Holding them up, he announced, “Mooney says we’re tapped out to the end of the year, but he gave twelve victims’ worth.”

Emil nodded and got up from his chair. “That’s more than enough.”

“To do what?” Vicky asked.

“I’m going to drain her. It’s the only way to leech the poison—”

Vicky stood in front of him, her eyes filled with terror. “Emil, you can’t. It’s too much strain on her all at once.”

Emil laid his hand on her shoulder. “Vicky, listen to her breathing. Get a good whiff of her. The poison will kill her if we don’t leech her quickly.”

Vicky stopped Emil as he went to clasp Amber’s hand. “Wait, this is my job.”

Emil began to say something, but he watched the pleading look in Vicky’s eyes and closed his mouth. Getting up, he took the bag of blood from Vicky, then moved around to the other side of the bed. Crawling over to Amber, he knelt and propped her head in his lap.

A look of annoyance crossed Amber’s face, and she rasped an objection too soft even for vampire ears to make out. She was trying to explain that their plan wouldn’t work. But the icy toxin kept her vocal chords numb.

Vicky needed to act quickly, but she couldn’t stop herself from staring at Amber’s wrist. Amber’s pulse was weak, hardly visible under her skin despite how thin it was from dehydration.

Raising Amber’s arm, Vicky bit through the skin over her vein, then released the bite to draw back on the wound.

Emil punctured the bag of blood near the corner with his teeth. He slipped the leaking hole between Amber's lips, and her cheeks caved as she sucked back the bag in one pull. Emil pulled the bag away and leaned over to retrieve another from the chest set beside the bed. Amber drained each bag brought to her lips until she'd consumed two victim's worth. When he set the next bag over her mouth, she shook her head weakly and said, "I can't. I'm full." She gasped for air, and then she shook her head. "This isn't going to work. Dimitri said so."

She thought, *What? Now I believe him?*

Vicky patted on the bed for a gauze pad. She raised her head to cover the wound as she frowned at Emil. "I keep pulling, but there's still a taint to her blood."

Emil nodded and rested Amber's head back down on the bed. "We'll trade places."

"Emil—"

"We have to try," Emil said, cutting her off. "At the very least, we have to drain enough to keep her alive."

Vicky allowed Emil to take her place by Amber's side. But his expression became increasingly frustrated, and finally, he had to back off the wound because he was full too. Amber wouldn't take any more blood despite Emil draining her, and her voice had once again fallen to a whisper too soft to understand.

She was still trying to say, "This won't work."

Emil bandaged Amber's wrist and got up to pace the room. The sun had already risen outside, and fatigue was taking its toll on him.

He tried to think logically about what little he knew. The nightmare blood was a poison to humans, but it should have been drained away long before by Vicky's efforts. It seemed impossible that he could also drain her and still taste the nightmare blood.

Vicky moved in front of Emil to stop him, her eyes full of sick misery. "Just go to bed. We'll try to look through the books again tomorrow."

Emil grabbed Vicky's wrist and drew her into an embrace. He rubbed her back as she started to tremble. She was sick with fear and wracked by guilt for being unable to do anything to protect her partner. Emil understood how she felt, because he too felt just as helpless and lost for an answer.

He could offer her nothing but the comfort of his presence, and so, in spite of his fatigue, he remained with her.

When she stopped crying against his shoulder, Emil guided her back to the bed and had her lie beside Amber. He picked up the ice chest with the remaining blood and left the room, sparing a worried glance back at Amber before he shut the door.

Vicky scooted closer to Amber, not bothering to undress or get under the covers. She was too tired by then to make the effort. She closed her eyes and thought, *I wish there was some god that I could pray to.*

Chapter 19

Scotland, 1939

Vicky woke up still burning under the full light of the midday sun. Her battered face pulsed with agonizing frequency, and her shattered ribs rubbed against each other, driving hot spikes into her lungs. Her left forearm was broken, as was her elbow, and every wound was a hot angry throb that couldn't be relieved.

But from her legs, she felt nothing. She eased her right hand down to try and feel her thighs, and instead, her fingers froze when she felt stickiness between her legs. She drew her hand back and found her own blood.

Mixed in the sticky fluid were chunks of something black. Vicky sniffed at the gritty black specks, but she couldn't make out what they were. Maybe some of the road filth had risen in a plume during her impact, and it had stick to her shattered pelvis?

She reached down again, trying to find where a bone was poking through her skin. The process was agonizing, because her pelvic bone was broken in so many places that the chunks were almost floating under her loose muscles.

But there was no hole. Vicky supposed that it was possible that she'd been out so long that the wound had already healed. But the possibility was improbable to her, even in her tortured mental state.

She found a hard lump when she pressed in on the flesh just above her pubic hair. The lump didn't feel like a bone, and when she pushed her fingers down more firmly, she could almost swear that she felt a chafing sensation inside her body cavity. The second time she attempted this, the lump broke into many more sections, and then cool, fresh blood trickled out of her, almost like a human menstrual period.

Vicky stopped playing with the lump.

All around her, people walked the street, and yet not one person noticed her. No one would even park their vehicles near her. It seemed impossible that they should miss all six feet of Vicky lying partway on the street, her useless legs splayed out over the sidewalk, which told her that she wasn't alone.

She'd barely completed the thought when a voice in her mind commanded, *Roll over and lay in the gutter where you belong. Lay on your back and look up at the sun.*

The angry voice was impossible to fight with, and Vicky pulled herself into the gutter with her right arm, then laid on her back to stare up at the sun.

The voice returned with more force, the cold malice in the man's projected thought a weapon all its own. *You want to die already, but you will live, and you will learn your proper place in the world. If you ever see a halfling again, you will drop your eyes and move on.*

Vicky thought nothing to resist the voice, and still he assaulted her, magnifying the heat of the sun by a compulsion. She felt as if a fire were stripping away her skin, reducing

her every last nerve to ash. But the process never ended, and her tortured flesh smoldered throughout the boiling summer afternoon. No matter how much she tried to scream, the halfling kept her throat locked tight.

The psychic attack ended only after the sun slipped behind the horizon, and once the pain subsided, Vicky realized she could feel a myriad of prickles in her legs. She still couldn't move them. Vicky started to worry that she would be caught when the hate-filled voice sent, *No, Vicky, you will not be caught. I'll make sure you can crawl out of town and get away safely. We'll grant you mercy if you go back where you came from.*

Vicky made no arguments. She first dragged herself through the streets, then crawled when her legs healed enough to bear her weight. She got up to stumble at a slow walk, and as soon as she could, she broke into a full run.

She didn't stop running until the first signs of dawn. Then she buried herself in a shallow pit, a low, animal habit that would have shamed her parents to see.

Only a common animal would sleep under the earth. Her mother spoke with disdain in Vicky's mind. *That filth belongs to the worms and the dead humans.*

She never slept in a hole again.

Chapter 20

Saturday, November 15, 1997

Vicky licked her lips, and then she drew in a gasping breath through her nose when a hand clamped over her mouth. Her eyes snapped open, and she saw Emil hunched over her on the bed. The whites of his eyes were replaced by a pulsing web of blue blood vessels, and his corneas had a bright sheen, a cold-blooded killer's intense glare.

He set a finger to his lips, dropping his hand before he whispered, "We need to leave now."

Vicky didn't have to ask why by then. Her senses were too sharp, and her throat was dry and rough. Her tongue rasped against the roof of her mouth, and her fangs ached like she hadn't fed in months.

The urge to feed was unnatural, a side effect of drinking the nightmare blood they'd taken from Amber. The recognition of the symptoms removed any questions of what was wrong, or where they were going. They were both falling into a bloodlust; that was what was wrong. Wherever they were going, it was to indulge in an orgy of food.

Emil kept his search moving through residential areas, remaining silent aside from his panting breath. Hunger clawed at both their stomachs, but Emil was looking for something big, a group of humans large enough to burn out the feeding frenzy in one attack.

He finally found it around ten, a house party in a massive two story brick home. At any other time, Vicky would have objected to breaking into the house for meals. But the hunger in her stomach drove her past the point of maintaining her few convictions.

Vicky cut the phone lines while Emil broke into the garage to shut off the breakers. On her way back around the house, she jammed a chair under the knob of the back door, just in case someone tried to run that way.

What followed could have filled the script for an entire horror movie. Emil waited for the young master of the home to come and check the breakers, and Vicky moved to the front of the house to slip through the front door.

Killing the teen with lethal efficiency, Emil emerged from the garage and waded through the partygoers with a bowie knife, dropping victims with a speed and precision that froze most of the humans in their tracks. Those that ran, Vicky took down herself.

The heavy metal music both masked the victims' terrified screams and provided a surreal beat to the rhythmic movements of both vampires.

The stereo was playing a cover of *Sympathy for the Devil* from Guns N' Roses when Emil leaned over to turn down the volume. They started to feed in the following silence, taking long drinks from each wound, though they let plenty of the blood spill into the carpet.

Emil was again creating a scene to baffle the police. The evening news would be full of morbid details about the brutal act, but no one would suspect the deeds were done by vampires.

After all, vampires always left fang marks, didn't they?

For half the night they fed, resting between fits of gorging. The nightmare blood was like a potent drug, an aid for the appetite that kept Vicky high on the edge of the most perfect bloodlust. But though she quickly tired of the high, it stayed with her until the victims were cold and tasting spoiled.

When the mystical blood burned itself out, Vicky stood in the living room gawking at the carnage they'd left behind. Dead teenagers lay mingled in a sticky pool of blood, every single body laying face up to reveal their frightened death masks.

It was far more gruesome than anything Vicky had ever done before, but what troubled her wasn't the act. It was how much she liked killing under the influence of the same blood which was draining the life from her partner.

They returned home without speaking to each other. Emil was lost in his own troubled thoughts, and it showed in his brooding glower and his rapid pace.

Vicky wondered if he felt just as dirty for liking what he did.

Ellen met them at the door, her soft smile bringing hope to Vicky. "You've found something?"

"I've been reading Amber's memories, and Dimitri showed her a healing spell," Ellen said. "I haven't tried it yet, but I think I can handle casting it."

Emil heaved a tired sigh, and said, "God, I hope so. I don't think I care to go through leeching her again."

Ellen made a small laugh, waving a hand at his

questioning look. “Never mind.”

“Do share,” Emil insisted.

“I just find it funny when a vampire calls out to my deity.” Ellen’s smile became sarcastic before she turned away from Emil to ascend the stairs. “It’s...suitably comforting.”

Ellen focused her will and laid her hands on Amber’s shoulders. Calling to the toxic blood, she drew the fluid out through Amber’s pores, covering her body in a sheen of red. The film lifted away from her skin and evaporated in the air as a violet smoke. Ellen turned her will next toward repairing the damage, but for nearly a full minute, Amber lingered on the edge of unconsciousness.

Ellen sent her an impulse, *Open your eyes.*

Amber did, and then sat up slowly.

“How do you feel?” Emil asked.

Amber blinked at him, a smile warming her face before she nodded. “Really good, actually.” She got to her feet, nodding after a brief inspection of herself. “Yeah, I’m—” Vicky swept her into a tight embrace, and then Amber wheezed out a pained breath.

Ellen laughed with relief and said, “Ease up, Vicky. She can’t breathe.”

Vicky loosened her arms, and Amber raised her head to smile at her partner. But Vicky couldn’t return it no matter how much she wanted to. Relief tore a hole in her emotional dam, and all of her

anger, fear, and guilt rushed out of her in a torrent. Her normally calm face crumbled as tears began to spill over her cheeks.

Amber raised her hand, and Vicky dipped her head. Amber's thumb swept a path through the first lines of tears, staining Vicky's skin blue. There was no way for her to catch or dry the flood, nor was she trying to.

Leaning her head into Amber's soft caress, Vicky whispered, "I thought I was going to lose you."

Amber's smiled again and nodded. She wanted to say something flippant, but instead she raised her other hand to cup Vicky's cheek and brush away Vicky's tears.

Chapter 21

United States, 1993

Every night for three months, Vicky watched the development of the Asylum with growing interest. A goth club would be the perfect place to recruit pets, and then she wouldn't have to kill so often. She wasn't tired of killing, only of running and hiding.

Vicky hadn't returned directly to the US, because she had no way to afford the trip. The McCulloughs left her with nothing, and once again, she was forced to wander alone.

But Europe had not been the best place to find cash at the time. With the war efforts cranking up, Vicky more often found bullets in steady supply, and unfortunately, she kept collecting them in her body.

With the help of a fleeing kitsune named Jun, she had managed a voyage back to the Netherlands. Unfortunately, they arrived only three months before the blitzkrieg did, and Jun was killed by a German grenade. Vicky managed to escape without getting wounded, but her relief lasted five hours before she was gunned down and had to play dead to convince a platoon of soldiers to move on.

She dragged herself into a safe hiding place, watching the Germans take over Amsterdam. Though she was motivated by revenge rather than patriotism, Vicky fed from the Germans often, taking whatever funds they had to help build enough

money to get back to America.

At last, in 1942, she made her return voyage home, and the trip was extra slow for a number of storms that seemingly came out of nowhere. At times, it seemed the gods themselves were working to keep her from getting back. The idea was absurd, but it kept Vicky in check, and she starved for a full two weeks, keeping herself locked in her room to avoid killing any of the other passengers. She was fearful that feeding would make the storm stronger, capsizing the cruise ship in the middle of the ocean.

Returning to New York was not a happy occasion, even if she was grateful to be back on dry land. Her old stomping grounds were no longer familiar, and despite her efforts to search for other vampires, she found no one. She stayed only long enough to collect traveling funds, and then she moved on.

The years after her return to the US were filled with the same patterns. She found a place to linger for two weeks most times, and she'd never spent more than a month in any location. During every hunt, she took money and any other valuables she could from her victims. The scene around each victim could be made to look like a lethal robbery, and she sipped from each victim rather than drain them and leave behind a trail of evidence. Instead of taking only one kill, she often claimed three or four victims in order to fill herself completely.

She favored hunting for drunks near bars and clubs, always telling herself that she did so because they were often flush with cash. But in truth, she was using the alcohol in their blood in a vain effort to numb her pain.

When she didn't hunt for food, she searched in vain for other vampires. Over the years, she began to develop a bleak thought that she was somehow marked as unclean for taking William as her partner. She thought that perhaps even after time passed, the halfling's scent still marked her out as a traitor to her people, and the other vampires were avoiding her.

But she wasn't searching so much as wandering aimlessly, and many times, she missed chances to meet other vampires, because they were wandering aimlessly too. They were just as alone and frightened as she was, and each of them harbored a fear that somehow, they might have been abandoned by their parents because they weren't strong enough to survive.

The wandering gypsy path she took was a safe life, but it was dull and lonely too. No matter how lonely she felt, Vicky couldn't allow herself to think of missing William. The thought of his face filled her with dread, and caused her to cast nervous glances over her shoulder each time, as if someone from the McCullough clan might jump out to attack her again.

During her travels, Vicky also found America to be deeply prejudiced. Anyone who looked too different was snubbed, and renting an apartment or a hotel room with her looks was almost impossible. Instead, Vicky rented storage rooms wherever she moved. The only thing she kept in it was an oversized coffin that locked from the inside. The coffin and the Packard Hearse she drove between cities were both ironic gifts for herself. She bought them in grudging acceptance of the human misconceptions developed about her people.

She never recruited pets, nor did she seek out any of the people she ran across with exotic scents.

Her reasons for hiding seemed validated when she met the berserker in California. He had seemed like such a nice man until he chased her down and beat her within an inch of her life. The only reason he gave up was because he was shot by a police officer, and he ran only after being wounded three times.

Vicky almost felt bad for having to drain the cop, but her alternative was laying in a broken heap and waiting for his backup to arrive. As a parting gift, the cop put two slugs in her chest. Vicky wasn't sure if she was happy about surviving during the week it took her to cough up the bullets.

Just over fifty years of running ended in 1990, in Tucson. It was there that Vicky decided she would stay and set down roots to declare the city as her turf. Her claim was easy to make, since she was the only vampire in Tucson.

The last vampire coven to inhabit the city had been killed in 1975 by a group of self-proclaimed witch hunters, who were secretly funded by the Southern Baptist church. The witch hunters had long before moved on to other targets, so the city was free from threats, both from competing blood drinkers, and from humans.

Yet, even with the lack of competition, Vicky began to diet, spacing out her meals to once every three days, and she switched the weapons she used to make every victim seem like a random killing. Her diet included only drinking partially from her one victim, and so she had shed most of her muscle mass in the process.

Vicky alternated her hunting areas throughout the city, and in hindsight, she was amazed that she hadn't run into Ellen before opening night at the Asylum.

Vicky was truly dressed to kill in a fashionable sense, a tight lycra top hugging her chest, and a short black skirt showing of most of her long legs. The calf length spiked heel boots she wore brought her height to over seven feet, and she towered above everyone else in the club, unable to help from attracting attention.

She became an instant celebrity, and she gathered phone numbers from a dozen people within the first hour. They all wanted to know what it was like to be fed from.

Ellen arrived after midnight, and she stood out like a neon light in the darkness. She wore a red T-shirt with a white circle and a yellow lightning bolt silk-screened on her chest, a rumpled black skirt that fell to her ankles, and a pair of brown sandals. Over her right shoulder hung the strap to a multicolored backpack. In her outfit, Ellen would have looked more at home at a rave than she did wandering through the monochrome crowd of club patrons.

Her reddish-blond hair was wavy and unkempt, but it was also clean, scented only with a residue of floral shampoo. She wore no perfume or makeup, nothing to mask her natural odor. Yet, even without cosmetics, she was paler than some of the patrons in the club.

Vicky knew she was a halfling, and she did exactly what she'd been commanded to do, so many decades before. She dropped her eyes and began to make excuses that she needed to leave.

Ellen blocked her exit, a soft smile playing on her lips as she introduced herself. “Hi, I’m Ellen McCullough.”

Vicky reacted like she’d been tapped with a live wire, her body stiffening in terror. Vicky was too scared to hide her thoughts, and Ellen’s smile faded as she got the vampire’s full history in a flashback. She knew everything before Vicky could even take a step back.

When she did, Ellen raised her hand. *Wait*, she sent her thought, along with an impulse, *Calm down*.

Vicky did, but she still glanced away from Ellen. “I need to leave.”

“No, it’s all right, Vicky. I’m...I’m a refugee, and our family doesn’t hunt for refugees anymore. It...it’s one of the few courtesies the bastards offer us, but you don’t need to be afraid of me, or of them.”

She reached out to take Vicky’s hand and sent, *Let’s go find a table to talk*.

It wasn’t a command, but Vicky let Ellen lead her through the crowd to a booth.

They sat across the table from each other. Vicky’s eyes wandered down to the silver chain around Ellen’s neck, then to the silver cross which hung from it. Ellen offered her an apologetic smile. She was already aware of Vicky’s allergies to silver, and she reached up to unclasp the necklace and slip it into her bag.

Ellen didn’t talk. Instead she sent her memories to Vicky, detailing the abuse she’d suffered at the hands of the family elders until she chose to run away.

Their extreme methods of child rearing were meant to indoctrinate Ellen, and she might have become a willing believer in the family's values were it not for her witnessing a cull of the magi when she was thirteen. Twenty men were put down, the mind-wiped slaves dying without so much as a whimper before they were stacked in a furnace and blazed down to bones and ash. Ellen was there to see the men killed. She saw their bodies loaded into the furnace, and she watched her aunts and uncles patiently grinding the bones into dust in huge copper pestles.

The ash and powdered bones were scattered in the desert, and no trace was left of the men. It was like they never existed.

Six months later, Ellen was pushed into the cell of a newly abducted slave. His face was covered by a hood, but it didn't matter what he looked like. He was already erased, a mind-wiped puppet who was being controlled by one of her uncles.

Ellen had always suspected it was Duncan who controlled the mage slave that raped her, but she couldn't be sure.

During her pregnancy, she made plans to flee with her child. She was even more committed to the idea of leaving if she had a son, as male hybrids were eventually made into slaves, and they were culled just like the magi. That she had a daughter did not ease her nerves, but she never had the chance to see her plans through. Ellen's daughter was taken from the home while Ellen was still recovering from labor. She'd never even been allowed to know her daughter's name.

For adding to the gene pool, the family “rewarded” her with a partner, a cousin, ten times removed, named Alexander. Ellen was fond of him, but the family’s choice of partners ended up being a mistake on their part. Alexander encouraged Ellen to leave, and at the age of sixteen, she took his advice.

She had been on her own ever since then, and like Vicky, she was weary of being alone. Vicky could understand her feelings, and she could relate to them. That did not prevent her from feeling hesitant at forming a friendship with the halfling.

For one thing, Ellen’s memories confirmed that the leaders of the McCullough family were just as sadistic as they’d always been. But the other problem was, Vicky knew enough about halflings to understand that when they got lonely, they looked for someone to cuddle with.

Vicky knew Ellen was craving physical contact, and the intense look of longing in the halfling’s silver eyes made Vicky feel uneasy.

But she couldn’t leave. Already she was enchanted by Ellen. It was more than just her scent. It was the ease with which Ellen accepted Vicky, and the small courtesies she made, like taking off the offending silver necklace.

Ellen convinced Vicky to try something bold that night, a public feeding. In any other place, Vicky would have started a riot. But the patrons of the club crowded the table to watch Vicky work with a package of razor blades one of the patrons was carrying.

Ellen located the man with the blades by scanning the thoughts of the patrons, and she subtly influenced the crowd’s

interest, turning the feeding into a spectacle for a morbid audience.

Vicky overfed that night, and when she had to turn away the next volunteer, the slip of a woman whined with heartbreaking disappointment.

Vicky laughed and said, “Come back tomorrow night, and you can be first in line.”

Ellen walked out of the club with Vicky, and her slender hand slipped into Vicky’s before she looked up and smiled. “Would you like to come back to my place for a nightcap?”

Vicky’s heart gave her away when it started pounding. Of course she wanted to. But the old conditioning, drilled into her over five decades before, was still too powerful. Vicky sighed and looked down at the sidewalk. “Maybe some other time.”

Chapter 22

December 18, 1997

Vicky walked into the kitchen, but stopped in the doorway. Her mouth stretched in a wide, warm smile at the scene playing out in front of her at the kitchen table. Claudia nursed her one-month-old son, Devin, while Amber sat beside her. In front of Amber was a bowl, and judging from the scent, the contents were a mixture of hamburger meat drowned in human blood.

Red blood dripped from the corner of Amber's mouth, and blue blood trickled away from Claudia's breast in runnels. Devin's first fangs left dozens of holes around his mother's nipples while he fed, and Claudia had switched him over to her other breast while she drank a glass of blood and waited for the damage to heal.

Both women wore serene expressions, a mother and an expectant mother sharing a quiet moment together.

With the crisis averted, everyone had abandoned their posts to return back to normal life, or as close to normal as halflings and magi ever got, anyway.

Marcus left, returning to his magic training with his family. He'd decided he couldn't put up with watching Amber picking up all of Vicky's "worst habits." Rather than being hurt, Amber took it as a compliment. Which made Marcus that much more upset, and Vicky suspected the two would never be getting back together. The knowledge pleased her, though she didn't say so to Amber.

Ellen remained for another week, but she stayed to request a favor from Emil. He taught her to read and speak daemonic tongue. Ellen took her lessons directly from his mind, but it still took her the better part of four days to master speaking the hissing language without lisping an accent onto her words. She left without explaining her interest, only saying that the skill “might come in handy later.”

Vicky never did get a chance to talk to Alexander, but she suspected the distance he kept between them was only natural. He was not fond of her because she was constantly putting his partner at risk from one major threat or another. He said nothing directly, but his cool stare accused her every time he had to be in the same room as her. When Alexander left, Vicky was relieved.

The rash of murders in the city became a sad statistic that were lamented upon for two full weeks. But, true to human form, there were other, more heinous crimes to panic over soon enough. All of those crimes were committed by humans, a fact which gave Vicky some measure of comfort. No one would ever suspect the vampires for the unsolved crimes, because human monsters were always working hard to match the vampires for their brutality.

Amber pulled Vicky from her thoughts, asking, “Are you planning on painting a picture?”

Vicky smirked and nodded. “You never know. I just might.” She walked over to the table and leaned over to peck a kiss on her pattern bloody lips. She licked her lips, laughing before she said, “Oh, that tastes good. I’ll have what you’re having.”

Amber beamed a close-lipped smile, being self conscious about the raw meat stuck between her teeth. “I got the urge for something solid today, so I went to the store.”

Vicky frowned with instant disapproval in her expression. “Amber, it’s not a good idea for you to go outside. You’re getting close to your first feeding frenzy, and the city is still quaking in fear from your last misadventure.”

“I’m being careful,” Amber said. “I didn’t walk to the store.”

“Driving isn’t much better.”

Amber shook her head. “I used a shadow portal. The only temptations I had were in the store, and my common sense kept me focused on getting the meat and leaving.”

Vicky nodded and withheld her next comment while she started making her own breakfast. But she still worried, because Amber would find common sense was in short supply once she went into a feeding frenzy. Still, Vicky had larger concerns to worry about.

The nightmare blood was gone from Amber’s system, but Dimitri’s influence couldn’t be purged from her mind. The wrym’s subliminal gift, a small collection of magic spells, had slowly unfolded in Amber’s memory.

The portals were one of four shadow spells she’d learned, not including the healing spell. The portals were the most useful, but also the most disconcerting. Amber’s scent was masked when she slipped into the inky shadows she cast, and once inside the shadow plane, she could direct the portal

to move anywhere rapidly. Her first experiments panicked the entire house, who thought she'd been taken by Dimitri again. They were still edgy every time she "vanished," but there was little they could do to convince Amber to stop experimenting.

The portal spell was what she played with most, while the next most frequently trained was the healing spell. Vicky didn't care for Amber's practice at all, because Amber wounded herself, often deeply.

Amber wanted to learn how to focus through her pain so that no matter how much she was suffering, she could still perform the spell. In the process, she was also upping her tolerance for pain, pushing her threshold higher with each injury.

She should have been covered in hideously long scabs, but every wound healed without traces of a scar. As with the portals, casting the healing spell became second nature.

Over the next few weeks, the other three spells unfolded in Amber's mind. She could cast a circular scrying shadow, but she couldn't find a use for it yet since it required knowing the location of her targets. It wasn't possible to just think of a name and have the shadow pick up their grey-toned images. Instead, the view was a camera that Amber had to concentrate to move and direct.

After a few fly through viewings of the city, Amber settled on using the scrying shadow to spy on the neighbors just before bed, a dull soap opera sometimes made more interesting by their early morning sexual routines.

Next, Amber picked up the ability to summon shadows. She could plunge a room into total blackness, even overpowering the electric light bulbs and blinding the vampires. But because they could pick her up by her scent, and because Dimitri wouldn't be affected by the parlor trick, Amber found it the least useful of her talents.

The last ability was only a few days old, and Amber discovered it during a healing spell training session. She stabbed her outer thigh with a butcher knife and sliced the blade free instead of pulling it out. The result was a jagged tear that had spilled a great deal of blood on the floor.

Amber asked Vicky about who should lick it up when her pained smile fell, and then her eyes glazed over.

Vicky assumed she had gone into shock until Amber yawned widely, her lips rounding in a frightening O shape. The inside of her mouth was lost in inky shadow. But it wasn't a shadow. It couldn't be. The kitchen light was on, and a real shadow would have dissipated, even under the weaker light cast by the low watt bulb.

The thing in Amber's mouth was more like an oily black fluid that she'd retched without leaning over. The slick tendril hung from her mouth in a seeming perpetual fountain while the bottom spilled onto the floor and spread out over the blood. It lingered an instant before it whirled back up into Amber's mouth.

The floor was clean, and only the blood on Amber's leg remained. Amber asked if Vicky wanted it, but for the first time in her life, Vicky didn't have an appetite.

The memory of the latest spell was so disturbing that Vicky almost lost her appetite again. But she forced away the memory and settled herself at the table between Amber and Claudia.

Her attention moved to the door when she smelled Emil. He walked into the kitchen, and his mouth twisted in a lopsided grin. She asked, “First impression?”

“How very Norma Rockwell,” he remarked and rumbled a chortle. “Where did you get the hamburger?”

“I used a portal,” Amber said. “Oh, I already boiled a kettle for tea. Help your self if you want some of the water.”

Emil nodded, but his smile softened. He tried not to show his concern as he went to the freezer for a teapad, but the sentiment still flooded his eyes.

Magic casting made him nervous, even with his advanced age. His agitation was even more apparent while he dunked the gauze pad in his cup. He jerked the string so fast that he flicked bloody water all over the counter.

He stared at his tea, trying to sound casual as he asked, “Have you picked up any new spells?”

“No, not since the feeding spell came to me,” Amber said.

Vicky shuddered at Amber’s label for the spell. “Can’t you think of some other name for it?”

“I know it looks gross, but it’s really a clean way to feed.” Amber shrugged. “I don’t think I’d use it while drinking a bottle, but I admit it could be handy in cleaning up after myself, knowing what my dull fangs can do to repaint a room.”

Emil and Vicky exchanged another worried look. Vicky's frown spread wider, and she began to glower at Amber. "You're talking like you want to go on a hunt."

Amber stared back with a thoughtful expression, her tongue playing with a piece of meat stuck between her teeth until she accidentally punctured the tip on her upper canine. Her fangs were admittedly sharper than the month before, though not much longer.

It was a minor pain, and her face barely twitched as she nodded. "Maybe I am, but why do you say it like it's a bad thing?"

Vicky's mouth opened, and her gaze rose up to Emil, who smiled and offered her a shrug. "I—I don't think it's a bad thing, in theory. But you're close to your first frenzy, and it's safer if you stay at home and feed from the stock."

Amber sighed. "I know you want to protect me, but the syrup from the pets is just that. It's got no flavor to it because they're all too happy to bleed out for us. Somehow I doubt there's a way to get terror bottled without sending away a pet for good."

Claudia rocked back her head and laughed. "Spoken like a true vampire."

"Yeah, but she isn't a vampire, Claudia," Vicky said. "After our child is born, Amber's going to come back to her senses, and she'll have to deal with everything she's done."

"What, you think I'll go back to being my old self again?" Amber shook her head. "There is no going back to innocence, and there's no way to take back my magic blessing. I've given

that up to become more like you.” Amber leaned her head over, a look of confusion spreading across her pale face. “Isn’t that what you wanted?”

“Yes,” Vicky agreed quickly. “Of course I want to share everything with you, but I’m also scared for what will come once you’re no longer a blood drinker.”

“Vicky, it’s a problem that’s still almost a year away,” Amber said, leaning over to take her partner’s hand. “If you want to share everything with me, then let’s go hunting tonight.” Amber smiled, her expression becoming mocking. “Or are you worried that with my new abilities, I can outvamp you?”

Vicky squirmed and made a weak smile. “Do you have any idea how much like a teenage whelp you sound right now?”

Emil chuckled. “I was just thinking that.”

Amber waited until he lifted his cup before she asked, “Why are you laughing? That would make you a child molester.”

Emil coughed on his tea, and for several seconds, he had trouble deciding whether he wanted to growl in anger or howl with laughter.

Amber sat on her haunches, perched on the ledge of a building while she watched four men take turns beating a homeless man. Her mouth was parted in a wide, cat-like grin, and her brown eyes were shining under the light of the half moon suspended above them.

Vicky didn't need to ask what Amber was thinking. The men below were perfect targets for Amber, since she would feel no guilt for their deaths later on. The justification might help her to alleviate her guilt once she was back in touch with her human side.

"The night is young," Amber said. "You can pick up the next victims, but this whole set is mine."

Vicky laughed, but there was a nervous edge to her voice. "Aren't you taking on a little bit more than you can shoulder for your first kills?"

Amber shook her head. "My first kills were Jane and John, a lovely couple who Dimitri fed me to prove a point." Amber hunched over, and laid her fingers on the brick wall.

The shadows under her fingers lengthened into black lances, and the four shadows merged into a long wavering serpent which slid silently down the wall toward her prey.

"Stay here, and I'll show you something I know you've never seen before."

Before Vicky could say anything, the shadows opened underneath Amber, and she slipped into the inky pool so fast she blurred.

The serpent grew as it descended to the ground, the front of the body peeling away from the wall to take on a bright glossy shine on every one of its scales. Hollow pits in the head swelled red, forming blood streaked eyes with veined black shadows completing the illusion of pupils.

Amber was literally draining herself to complete her

illusion, but Vicky couldn't be angry. She was too mesmerized by the surreal image of the giant anaconda growing out of the wall.

At the head of the alley, another shadow was forming, forming in a solid wall to block out most of the light in the alleyway.

It took Vicky another moment to realize no one driving past the alley would be able to see either. Amber was cloaking the area in shadow to make sure there were no witnesses.

The men looked up from their victim as the light from the streetlamps dimmed, and their voices raised in shouts of terror once they'd spotted the giant serpent. The men gaped with terrified, pale faces. They were unable to move until long after the lower body pulled away from the wall and spread to full thickness, coiling across the pavement to block the back end of the alley.

There was no way to escape, and the men shouted the same stupid confirmation to each other before someone pointed at the fire escape ladder near the serpent's tail.

The man who pointed it out ran, and the serpent's tail lashed out to knock him back into one of his buddies.

The serpent's mouth yawned open, and Amber sat curled in a ball on the serpent's tongue. The head was raised at just enough of an angle for Vicky to see her. Amber lifted her head, her gaze searching out Vicky before she winked.

Vicky smirked as she thought, *Show off.*

Amber rose up slowly and stepped onto the pavement, her white lips pulling into a tiny doll-like pout while she splayed

her hands and held her arms out to her sides. She looked like an oversized doll in her black dress, and only her body's distorted proportions and her thick platform boots spoiled the illusion. Her breasts were far too large for a child doll, and yet still too small for a Barbie. The size of her arms were too thick for either type of doll, and her stomach was swollen, though she was still not heavy enough that she'd developed a waddle to her walk.

But while Vicky didn't fall for the poor impression, the four men were a rapt audience who didn't notice the imperfections.

Amber walked with a stiff, mechanical stride, her head leaning until it almost touch her shoulder. Vicky shuddered involuntarily. Amber was imitating Annul's jerking motions once he possessed a human. She had ventured into the darkest parts of herself, and there would be no returning to the good, sweet Amber of the past.

This horrified Vicky, and it delighted her too.

The men groaned, sick with misery. They were frozen in place, quivering like rabbits under the gaze of a python while Amber approached them.

Amber raised the pitch of her voice as she whined, "Will you play with me?"

She opened her mouth in a wide yawn, and from where she perched, Vicky couldn't see the black ink of the feeding spell. But she shuddered again as her mind conjured a memory of the magical feeding appendage.

Amber retched, and the black slick ejected out and up to

form a wide wall, a tidal wave that splashed over the entire alley.

When it retracted, all four men were gone. Nothing was left except for their crumpled clothes. Amber drew the feeding spell back into herself and raised her head to grin at Vicky. She pointed, and Vicky looked near the dumpster, uttering a soft laugh.

The victim of the men, a homeless man who had been knocking on death's door, lay asleep on his side with a blissfully calm expression. He was completely healed from his injuries, and without a single bloodstain on his tattered clothes. Amber healed him in the same instant she'd cast the feeding spell, and she'd "cleaned" his clothing by absorbing the blood. She did all of this while holding up the illusory serpent and casting a shadow spell to dim the light. The amount of control she had over her spells was nothing short of incredible.

The snake dissolved as the bum woke up, and Amber went to him, kneeling down as she took his hand. The shadow wall at the head of the alley melted, and the street lights in the alley flicked back to their full brightness.

"Hi there," Amber said.

The homeless man was silent for some time before he said, "I was just being attacked, wasn't I?"

Amber shook her head. "I didn't see anything. You look fine to me, so maybe you should go to the hospital and check yourself in for a hallucination?"

Vicky snorted and clamped a hand over her mouth to keep from laughing out loud.

When the man had been sent away and Amber returned to the roof with another less dramatic portal spell, Vicky nodded her agreement.

“Very good, Amber. You just outvamped me.”

Chapter 23

December 18, 1997

Vicky got up in front of the podium and cleared her dry throat with the smallest cough. Looking nervously around at the humans gathered in the community center, she searched the last row of plastic chairs, where Amber sat wearing a wide grin.

Amber raised her hands to offer Vicky two thumbs up for effort.

“Hi, my name is Vicky, and...” She raised her eyes to the ceiling, trying to think back. She gave up and shook her head. “For way too long, I’ve been a functional alcoholic.”

She paused as the crowd all spoke up to greet her in a chorus of “Hi, Vicky.”

She smiled with self-conscious giddiness and waved. “I’ve been near bars for a long time, always picking up drunks every night. I’ve been going out so many nights, you’d think I was a vampire.”

This was a bold move, but it had the appropriate effect, as everyone laughed.

Vicky sighed, and her smile fell. “I started drinking, because my boyfriend was enabling my habits. I could have eaten healthy and avoided alcohol, but he liked me drunk. Maybe it was because I was a funny drunk. Or maybe he did it because I was a horny drunk.”

Vicky had to fight against the urge to cry, and she still had to raise her hand to ball her fists against her eyes, obliterating the first tears. She continued to rub for a few seconds to get rid of any trace of their blue tint on her skin.

Dropping her hands to grasp the sides of the podium, she took a deep breath and thought, *Let him go. Let William go, and Jun, and Ellen. From now on, you have a partner.*

Vicky looked at Amber then and smiled. “After him, I kept up the habit, because it helped to make me feel less lonely. But even when I found someone, I kept going to the bars, picking up other drunks. I got so good at working drunk that I never even thought about it. But one night, I was sitting in my favorite goth club.”

She paused as another round of laughs went through the room. “You laugh, but they had an awesome wine called Red Blood Cell, and when you look like me, people expect you to order certain drinks. I mean, can you not see me asking for a Bloody Mary?”

More laughter. Vicky dropped her head to look at the podium. “I looked around, and I realized that I was the worst drunk in the room. Because I could keep drinking, and I didn’t feel it anymore. I didn’t feel anything at all. And because I was drunk, I had someone special come into my life, and I couldn’t see it. I...I let her get away from me, and she ended up deciding she was straight after all.”

She paused to snap her fingers, but this admission brought nervous laughter. Revealing that she was bisexual made people more nervous than her confession to being a vampire. Vicky smirked at the absurdity of the idea.

“I met someone else, and I almost lost them too. But I almost lost them to a drug that they binged on, and I joined them in overdosing on it. And this was...it was so much worse than the alcohol. I thought I didn’t feel anything as an alcoholic, but I must have still had some kind of flawed moral code in place.

“But on the drugs, I didn’t give a fuck. I know this will scare you, but while I was on that drug, I would have thought of killing every last one of you, and it would have been funny, even appealing.”

She lifted her head, nodding as she appraised the sea of white, frightened faces. “That one bad trip scared me. I didn’t think anything could scare me, but that trip through hell did. And that’s when I decided to sober up.” She raised her hand to point to Amber. “I couldn’t do this without the help of my partner. I love you, Creampuff.”

“Love you too, Vicky,” Amber called over the hoots of laughter over Amber’s pet name.

Vicky waited for people to get quiet before she smirked. “If we can just find the right guy to add to our trio, I think we’ll be happy vamps.”

“Excuse me?”

The man who called out to them was tall, dark, and ruggedly handsome. His squared jaw and lean cheeks sported faint stubble, just enough to be sexy. He dressed in khakis and a pale denim work shirt, unbuttoned at the collar.

He wore cologne hinted with pheromones, to make himself more appealing, and hair tonic to keep his long brown hair under almost perfect control. He also smelled of a recent cocaine high, though he was no longer feeling the rush of the drug. He would be looking to get away from the meeting soon for another toot through his favorite one hundred dollar bill. Even with polite distance separating them both Vicky and Amber could smell the drug on him, and on his billfold.

He swept back his hair behind his right ear, smiling confidently before he offered out the same hand. “Hi, Robert Slocum.”

Vicky smirked as she clasped his hand. “Named by nature, I would hope.”

Robert snorted and took Amber’s hand next. “It depends on whether I’m having a good night, I guess.” He raised his hand to scratch the far side of his eyebrow, and then the corner of his eye. “I was...um, very impressed with your speech. It’s admirable that both of you are giving up drugs...”

He twisted around to see if anyone else was listening. No one was, but he lowered his voice to say, “Seriously though, were you messing with us? I mean, is this some kind of routine you do, to come in and spook the normal people?”

Vicky shrugged. “No. Are you belittling my experiences with drugs just because I look like a goth?”

Robert’s mouth fell open. “Uh, wait. You aren’t a goth?”

“Well, just because I hung out at—” Vicky snorted. “No, I can’t even say it with a straight face. Okay, so what if I’m a

goth? So what if my girlfriend outvamps me on a good night.”

“Like tonight,” Amber added before Vicky could keep rambling.

“Okay, so it’s your culture, and you aren’t just here to fuck with us.” Robert smiled and put his hands in his pockets. “Sorry if I’m giving you a hard time, but I’m a bit protective of the flock.”

“Or the harem?” Amber asked.

Laughing, Robert rubbed the corners of his mouth in a roguish gesture. “I try to help spread the love around, sure. But there’s no ring on this finger, is there?”

Amber smiled as she winked at Robert. “I noticed that too. I wonder, have you ever thought about playing around with a pair of crazy-ass vamps?”

Amber pushed Robert against the wall and raised up to kiss his chest. Robert laughed, his eyes locked on Vicky. “You know, Creampuff, I’d really like to see what she can do with those lips.”

“Yeah?” Amber said in a quiet, coy voice. “Well lean down here, stud-muffin, and I’ll explain the problem.”

When he leaned over, she grabbed the silver cross on his neck and tugged it lightly. “Vicky has an allergy to silver, so you have to lose the crucifix.” She waited out his laugh before she added, “and the earrings. Sorry, but if you want to find out what she’s like, you have to lose the metal. Otherwise, you’re just playing with me.”

Amber leaned her body in, arching her back to writhe against him.

She smiled impishly and said, “Not that I mind either way.”

“Well hey, no offense, but...you’re like the short, cute sister. I could still see doing you, but I’d feel really guilty the next day,” Robert said, straightening up and pulling off his silver stud earrings. “I’d have to have Vicky do me next, to help me get over the guilt right away.” He took off the necklace next, and he tucked them into his pocket.

Amber stepped back and smirked, “Good night, sweet prince.”

“Amber!” Vicky shouted, her deafening, angry volume causing both Amber and Robert to jump. “You don’t ever, *ever* mangle the bard like that again!”

Amber rubbed her finger in her ear as she nodded. “All right, fine! Fuck, Vicky, I think you just called the cops in advance.”

Robert looked back and forth quickly, and yet realization still came to him far too slowly. “Hey, you guys don’t really think you’re vamps, do you?”

“Oh, I’m not a vampire.” Amber smiled to show off her fangs. “I just have these because I’m having a vampire’s baby. But I don’t need to eat now, because I just plowed through four guys in an alley not two miles from here. We were looking for a meal for Vicky, and we saw the sign, ‘Alcoholics Anonymous meets tonight.’ I bet Vicky that there had to be at least one sober asshole like you taking advantage of—”

Robert tried to run by shoving his way past Vicky. She

caught him under his throat and pushed back, slamming him into the wall with one arm.

His head cracked against the wall, and stars exploded in his vision. He slid down the wall, groaning as he tried to fight the overwhelming urge to close his eyes.

He heard something click, but he couldn't look up. He thought the click was a switchblade, but he couldn't be sure.

Amber said, "No, Vicky. I want to see you bite him."

"What?" Vicky retracted the switchblade, staring at Robert with an uncertain expression. "Amber, I can't."

"I'll get rid of the body, Vicky. I can destroy every last trace of the bite. There's no guilt here, is there? You never worry about the victims being good or bad anyway, so this is one rule that you normally obey to help you survive."

"And you'll explain that to Emil before I tell him that I bit someone?"

"Go ahead," Amber said. "After he finds out what I can do, he might take me along on a hunt to clean up after him too. It's one more way that I can be useful to the coven, right?"

"Amber...jeez, I don't know." Vicky knelt, crawling over to Robert with a slow, uneasy pace.

He raised one hand, waving it in a protective gesture that meant little. He was too woozy to throw a real punch.

Vicky pushed his arm down, and then she frowned at Amber. "Now you're making me feel dirty."

Amber laughed quietly. "Why? Because I'm watching you eat?"

“No, because you didn’t used to enjoy it this much. And now...well it’s kind of dirty.” Vicky watched Amber sink down onto her haunches, and she pointed at Robert. “He’s an adulterer, and that’s really not all that bad.”

“Oh, and when my humanity returns, I might feel bad about you eating him? Would this guy be any different than the house full of teens you ate because you were stoned off of my tainted blood? Will he be different from any of the other victims we take together in the next year?” Amber waddled, duck-walking closer as she spoke.

She leaned over to look into Robert’s glazed eyes. “Funny, he doesn’t look like a victim to me. He just looks like food.”

“He is.” Vicky reached out to pet Amber’s cheek. “Amber, I don’t like seeing you unhappy, and when this bloodlust wears off, you will have to live with this. I don’t.”

“I’ll deal with it when that day gets here.”

“So, if you’re getting rid of the body, that means you’re going to using the feeding spell to consume him?”

“Yep, I’ll liquefy him, bones and all,” Amber said. “I’ll leave a clean pile of clothes, without a trace of DNA on them.” She closed her hand around Vicky’s fingers and tilted her head to kiss Vicky on her palm. She slipped her tongue out to lap a wet trail on Vicky’s skin, and she smiled when Vicky stiffened in response and started to pant.

“You’ve always told me that you couldn’t deny your nature, but you don’t bite victims, and that is denying a part of yourself.”

Vicky leaned her head over and laughed nervously. “Holy shit, Amber. When did you become the devil?”

Amber laughed too. “Let’s not go swelling my ego, lover. I’m a far cry from Lucien or Dimitri.” She pulled Vicky’s hand away and waved toward Robert. “Now, hurry up and eat your dinner before he dies and gets cold.”

Chapter 24

United States, 1995

Ellen rushed into the apartment, her green eyes glowing with happiness as she looked around the living room and nodded her approval. “Oh, Vicky, this is really nice! How did you find this?”

“The job you set me up with at the blood bank helps with the rent, but I met someone at the Asylum, a strange person who...sometimes they’re Jenny, and sometimes they’re Marcus, but they’re both my roommates. I’m not sure what they are, but they smell mostly human.”

“You draw mystic races like a magnet through iron filings.” Ellen laughed and followed Vicky back to her room. She spotted the coffin set up on an short wooden alter and laughed again. “Aw, no bed?”

Vicky pointed to her roommate’s door. “We can always use his, but I think he might be offended if I stained his sheets.”

“So where is he, or she, now?”

“He’s at a gaming session with his friends. He calls himself a mage, which is funny, because his girlfriend is a real mage.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Well, Kathy calls herself a witch, but she is the real deal.” Vicky moved to the bathroom to turn on the light and continue her brief tour of her new home. “She doesn’t live here, so it’s just me and...and the changeling, I guess.” She laughed as she went to the

kitchen. “I love this city. Every time I turn around, something else supernatural is popping up. I expect to see an elf any day now.”

“I hope not,” Ellen said, still smiling as she walked into the kitchen.

“Why would—oh right, sign of the apocalypse,” Vicky said.

“Yep, pretty much,” Ellen agreed.

“Can I get you something to drink?”

Ellen’s smile became positively devious. “I was about to ask you the same thing.”

Vicky uttered a quiet snort. “You know, with you being a Christian, I’d think you’d have some problems with me.”

“Judge not,” Ellen said, laughing with Vicky. “Come to the couch with your things, and I’ll give you a housewarming gift.”

Vicky needed no other encouragement, and she went to the bathroom to gather a lancet, gauze, and medical tape. *Everything a vampire needs for good, clean foreplay*, Vicky thought, which evoked a peal of laughter from Ellen.

She sat next to Ellen, holding her supplies in her lap while she leaned over to breathe in and sample Ellen. An excited tremor passed through Ellen’s body, and she sent the sensation to Vicky, telepathically sharing her feelings to encourage Vicky.

As if she needed to.

Vicky opened the lance and pierced Ellen’s skin, who made only a quiet sigh in response. She dipped her head to sip from the wound. She couldn’t let herself go into bloodlust, and the feeding was over all too soon.

When she finished bandaging the wound, Ellen surprised Vicky by moving to straddle her lap. Ellen's smile was confident and alluring, but her gaze was filled with yearning.

Vicky's pulse sped up under the intensity of Ellen's stare. Feelings she thought long dead and buried in Europe welled up fresh and vital in her once again. Her lips curled around her teeth, which were aching in spite of her just feeding.

Ellen dipped her head and bit Vicky's exposed collarbone. Vicky closed her eyes and rolled her head back, her breath becoming a soft pant.

In her heightened condition, Vicky picked up the scent of Marcus and several of his friends as soon as they got out of his car.

Ellen read her thoughts and rolled off of her lap to sit on the couch. She snickered and began primping her hair while Marcus unlocked the door. She elbowed Vicky's side, who finally took the hint and draped her hair over the bleeding bite mark on her shoulder.

Marcus and his friends piled into the room. He spotted Ellen on the couch, and he tried to wave his friends on to his bedroom. "Uh, head straight through, guys, and please ignore my new roommate."

"Dude, you found a vampire!" one of the guys shouted.

"We've seen the vamp already," another guy declared, though he paused in the living room when he noticed Ellen. "Wait, she's new." He laughed and asked, "Damn Marcus, are you building a harem?"

Marcus sighed and waved at his room again. “Guys, please head to my room to set up the game.”

“Hi, I’m Eric,” a gangly older teen said as he offered Vicky his hand. “Can you turn me into a vampire, please?”

Vicky smiled as she shook her head. “I’m sorry, but it doesn’t work like that. Guys, this is Ellen, my—”

“Lover?” Ellen offered.

Vicky nodded. “Close enough.”

Eric guffawed and faked a guilty expression. “Were you making out?”

Vicky opened her mouth, but Ellen was faster to comment. “Yes, and we were about to engage in hot lesbian sex before you walked in.”

Vicky choked back a laugh, looking like she would gag on it. “Ellen.”

Eric gawked with wide eyed surprise. “Really?”

“No, not really.” Ellen’s smile fell as she pointed at the gauze pad taped to her arm. “I just fed Vicky, and now we’re going to chant backwards prayers to Satan. Then we’ll kill all of you in his glorious name.” She kept her expression straight and her voice icy, and Vicky’s amused grin helped to make her act more convincing.

Perhaps it was because her teeth were stained with a thin film of Ellen’s blood.

Which is why Marcus was the only male not to take a step back. Instead, he sighed and rubbed the bridge of his narrow nose, his expression becoming irritated. “Vicky, I told

you not to make my friends nervous, and that rule applies to your houseguests too. Now please, tell your witch to behave.”

“Halfling,” Ellen said.

“Whatever, just don’t slaughter my friends for your crazy, daemonic...” Marcus’ eyes narrowed as he stared at Ellen’s neck. “Oh what the hell? You’re a Christian, so shut up.”

Ellen laughed and raised her hand to clasp her copper cross. “You don’t know that this isn’t just jewelry.”

“Nah, you got the look of a Christian, one of the true believers,” Marcus said.

Ellen’s smile dropped, and she regarded Marcus with a cautious expression. “And what’s that supposed to mean?”

A year and nine months would pass before Vicky realized that Ellen couldn’t read Marcus, and she didn’t come to that realization until Wendy Stoffel asked Marcus why she couldn’t read his mind. Vicky should have noticed it right away, because Ellen reacted with genuine confusion to Marcus’ comment.

But between her amusement at Ellen’s joke, and her mind still racing with dirty thoughts, she was too distracted to make the connection. Ellen never mentioned that she couldn’t read him, but then, she rarely discussed or used her powers. In fact, she often seemed ashamed of them.

Marcus grinned at Ellen and said, “You’re too happy. You true believers all act like you’re in on a secret that nobody else knows.”

Ellen relaxed on Vicky’s side as her smile returned. “I know a lot of secrets, but what my God is thinking isn’t one of them.”

Chapter 25

Friday March 13, 1998

Amber's magically enhanced feeding habits filled her so completely that she could skip meals without adverse side effects. The day after her first feeding frenzy, Emil had been concerned when she skipped breakfast. He had become alarmed when she skipped dinner as well, but she was truly feeling no thirst, nor was her child burning a hole in her stomach.

Amber didn't go back to the refrigerator to take a meal for a full week. She'd weathered her first feeding frenzy with an ease that was beyond a whelp of the same age. To beat the frenzy, she just ate four and a half people.

Mostly whole, and mostly at the same time.

Well over two months had passed since then, but Emil was still trying to wrap his head around how Amber could cram so many victims into her tiny frame. It was mind boggling, even if magic was involved.

Since her first hunt, Amber alternated between taking cold meals from the stock of pet supplies and venturing out to hunt for low-level criminals. Emil had gone on only one of those hunts to see her feeding spell for himself.

Once was enough, and though he didn't like to admit it, Amber had unsettled him because of the ease with which she erased people, leaving behind only clothing.

While Emil sipped his breakfast from a bottle, he watched Amber make tea and thought of her casting the spell again.

An idea came to him which he gave voice to. “Your feeding spell is a variation of the shadow portal, isn’t it?”

“It’s got portal-like qualities, but the substance I summon is...selectively corrosive. But it also stores the excess material in stasis until I need it.”

“So that’s how Dimitri was trucking around with a few gallons of nightmare blood,” said Emil. He got up to take an armload of empty bottles from the kitchen table to the sink.

“I’m sure he took the whole horse, so to speak,” Amber said, though her thoughts were still not on the same page as Emil. “The really cool thing is, I can slap it down on a hundred people and only eat one or two victims in the crowd. No one would be the wiser if I timed it right in a club while strobe lights were flashing.”

Amber sipped her tea before she offered Emil a wicked grin. “Funny thing to think about during breakfast, huh?”

Vicky sighed, though it quickly became a laugh. “We’re not going to a club, and I don’t care how convincing you make your argu—” Vicky stiffened and shot out of her seat.

All of the vampires did the moment they smelled Dimitri in the foyer.

“Hello?” he called out warily. “Wyrn in the hooooouse.” He waited in the silence, then asked, “Was that proper vernacular, or am I speaking in pig Latin?”

No one heard footsteps, but Dimitri leaned into the kitchen a second later, his white face pulling into relief. “No

one is leaping for weapons yet.”

“What good would weapons do?” Amber asked.

“Amber,” Emil warned.

“Well fuck, he’s going to toy with us either way, so why should I have to humor him?” Amber scowled at Dimitri as the wyrm strolled into the kitchen like he owned the place. “What brings you back to my master’s abode?”

“I’m here for you again, though that should be no surprise.” Dimitri folded his arms and leaned against the wall. “How are you liking the new gifts?”

“A couple are parlor tricks, but the feeding spell is mighty handy for dealing with—with feeding frenzies.” Amber’s scowl shifted to confusion. “Hey—”

“And the lights of recognition just flicked on,” Dimitri commented. “I apologize about the nightmare blood. I thought you could heal yourself.” He cringed as he read Amber’s mind. “And I’m sorry for leaving you in an apartment without a working phone. I swear, that wasn’t intentional.”

“I wonder,” Amber said.

“I’ve been on a quest for you in Lissand.”

Amber asked, “It took you three months?”

“No, it took me a few weeks, but there’s a layer of time dilation between here and Lissand.” Dimitri glanced around at the blank stares. “So, put more simply, I leave to Lissand for a day, and two to three weeks pass on Earth.”

Nobody reacted to his explanation, and he let it go. “In any case, I went on my quest to hunt down a certain creature,

and if I feed you their blood, you'll be truly immortal."

"Unicorn blood?" Emil asked.

Dimitri nodded. "That's it."

"Fuck you," Amber said.

Dimitri blinked at her, his face pulling into genuine confusion. "What?"

"You heard me just fine. I'm not taking anything else from you. Maybe you haven't noticed this, but nobody here trusts you. You told me last time that you wanted to help me live forever, and you damn near killed me. So even if you're telling the truth now, I'm sure there's a downside you aren't mentioning."

"Well, there's the matter of being eternally damned for feeding on the blood of the purest animal in creation, but hey, you're already a cannibal." Dimitri held up both his hands to simulate a scale, his arms wobbling up and down as he said, "Both are pretty much the same in God's book."

Amber shook her head. "I wasn't worshipping him."

"Helen doesn't care for cannibals either, but you get my point," Dimitri said.

Emil groaned, his skin flushing light blue while his cheeks bunched to pull his face into an irritated scowl. "Amber, drinking unicorn blood will curse you to be a blood drinker forever. That much is true. You'll heal from wounds faster than we could, but you'll always feel thirsty, even after you've just fed. You also can't go out in the sunlight anymore, because even partial exposure can kill you."

Amber snorted. "Damn, now that's some deal. I'll be stronger than the vampires, but with a weakness that can be exploited once every twelve hours." She had another thought. "What effect would this have on my child?"

Dimitri's hairless brow wrinkled while he brooded. "Amber, be reasonable. After you have the child, what will you do? You don't want to go back to being a normal human, do you?"

"I never was a normal human." Amber laughed at a thought, setting aside her teacup on the counter before she folded her arms to mimic Dimitri's pose. "I just decided what I'll do. When I deliver this kid, I'll have Emil knock me up again. Or hey, maybe I'll fuck Lucas and have his kid next. I'm young, so I've got plenty of time to be a modern day Lilith, making a new race of hell-spawn to plague the humans with."

Dimitri laughed enthusiastically and nodded. "Now see, that's a plan I could get behind if you really meant it." He shook his head, his expression bemused. "But the truth is, you're willing to accept what comes to you and see what happens."

Amber nodded. "Yep, it's worked out for me so far." Her smile dropped. "But I'm no fool, Dimitri. I know you'll force me into taking your deal."

"You're sure you won't try a little sip of unicorn blood?" Dimitri asked in a plaintive voice.

"Not even if you smeared my lips with it," Amber said. "Whether I'm good or evil has nothing to do with my choice. I don't trust you, and I never will."

Dimitri nodded. "All right." He lowered his arms, and then he slung his right hand up in a lazy underhanded toss.

A blue stone spotted with highlights of mottled grey rolled out of his fingers and arced up and over the vampires, heading straight for Amber's face. She snapped her hand up to catch it, and bolts of electrical energy shot through her body, driving the air from her lungs in a yelp.

Doubling over, she dropped to one knee and stopped breathing. She couldn't hear anything but rumbling, like thunder in the distance.

Emil spun to glare at Dimitri with unrestrained agitation. Despite the risk to his own health, he couldn't stop himself from shouting, "What the hell is wrong with you?"

Dimitri flinched, drawing his arms up in a mocking defensive gesture. "What?"

"Stop playing me for a fool!" Emil clenched his fists as tightly as his jaw, fighting to get his temper under control. "We've done nothing wrong, and you keep torturing us!"

"Torture?" Dimitri shook his head. "I don't know what you're talking about, and I don't think you do either."

Emil slung his hand in a furious gesture, waving toward Amber, who still hadn't moved. "Then what the hell was that?"

Dimitri said, "A thunderstone."

"A—" Emil's mouth fell open. He closed it and took a deep breath. "You killed a thunderbird?"

"Yep, and a unicorn. That's why it took me so long to get back. It's a pity about the unicorn. She was a real beauty. I guess I'll

have to drink her myself, since I've already got sunlight issues."

Amber gasped, her muscles relaxing enough to allow her to suck in a breath. Raising her head to stare at Dimitri with resentment, she used the counter to pull herself back to her feet. "If you've done anything to—"

"Your child is fine, although he is also imbued with the same magic as you." Dimitri paused, and no recognition came to Amber. "That would be the new magic blessing, which by its nature is similar to a deity's protection?"

Amber smirked, though the sentiment never reached her eyes. They were still glassy, and burning a fire of cold, insane fury. "Really?"

She created a diversionary thought first, and behind it, she imagined setting up a string of UV lamps in the main hallway to fry Dimitri's ass during his next visit.

Walking away from the counter to stand beside Vicky, she asked, "What number am I thinking?"

"I wouldn't know." Dimitri waited, and no one spoke. His shoulders slouched and he hung his head over. His display of regret was sincere, but no one believed him. Even if he could convince them, he couldn't make them care.

Raising his head, he frowned with feeble agitation. "Amber, I'm only trying to help you and your friends. I've always been honest with you about my motivations, and I'm asking you to trust me."

"Then you picked the wrong person to peddle your wares to." Amber held up the stone. "You wasted one trinket on—"

Emil coughed to catch her attention. “It’s not a—never mind. Go ahead.”

Dimitri’s face pulled into an incredulous scowl. “I don’t believe this. You’re going to defer to her? She’s a baby, the youngest one out of all of you.”

Emil shrugged. “This doesn’t have anything to do with us. You’ve been courting with Amber, treating us like our loyalty is a forgone conclusion. You can force us to do your bidding, and you know that. You can scare us into working for you. But you’ll never have our trust the way we trust her.”

“Why?” Dimitri asked.

Emil said, “Because she respects us.”

Dimitri glanced around, and every vampire met his gaze and nodded their agreement. His angry scowl deepened, and he stepped away from the wall, raising his hand to point an accusing finger at Amber. “I won’t forget this slight.”

“If all you want is slaves, feel free to look us up.” Amber shook her head. “But if you wanted allies, you fucked up, but good.”

Dimitri’s scowl melted. So did the rest of his head.

His body dissolved into a puddle of shadow that slid out of the kitchen, and seconds later, his scent was fading away.

Devin gurgled and broke the silence. Claudia glanced down at her son, letting go of her breath. The sound was shaky and full of fear, sounding so obvious that even the baby picked up on it and frowned.

“Is it over yet?” asked Claudia.

“It is for now, I think,” said Emil.

Amber asked, “Hey, Emil?”

“Hmm?” Emil noticed her waving the stone. “Oh, right. That ‘trinket’ he threw imbued you with the life-force of a thunderbird. As he said, it carries a charge like a deity’s blessing, and you can tap into that power to augment your spells. You’re carrying around the power of a demigod, in simple terms.”

“Okay, but there’s a curse of some sort attached,” Amber said.

“It depends on how you look at it. Technically you’re cursed with immortality. About the only thing that could kill you is decapitation...and dismemberment...probably fire would work too. Drowning could—”

Amber raised her hands, cutting him off. “Okay, there are loopholes.” Amber dropped her arms to her sides, her expression becoming uncertain. “Do you think I should have accepted his offer to be allies?”

Emil smiled. “You don’t have to defer to me like this.”

“Yes I do. This is your covenant, isn’t it?” Amber returned his smile. “So?”

“No, I don’t think you should have. I don’t trust him, but I’m surprised you turned down his offer. I thought you wanted to be one of us.”

“His offer wouldn’t make me into one of you. It would burden me with a curse, and a major weakness. What’s more, I’m sure it would also transfer over to my child, and I’m not saddling him with a curse like that.” Amber sighed. “But true to form, Dimitri didn’t offer me much choice.”

Amber settled into bed beside Vicky, draping her leg over her partner's hips. "You've been quiet all night."

"I'm still trying to figure out what Dimitri hoped to gain in recruiting you."

"You mean recruiting us," Amber said.

"No, I think Emil had it right, and this was never about us. We're not mystical creatures, and even if Dimitri is a blood drinker, he's not an ally of our people. He can't possibly hope to raise an army of vampires, because there aren't that many of us. We have little tactical value to him."

"But I'm different?" Amber asked.

"You are now, and maybe that was the point," Vicky said. "Maybe he hoped to hone you into a stronger mage, but one working with dark magic instead of...instead of the light magic you'd just lost."

"Then he was giving me something I'd just recently lost, even if I wasn't aware of it yet." Amber frowned. "I hadn't thought to try casting the locator spell since we left Arizona, but of course he's right. The moment I drank human blood, I lost my connection with Helen."

"Which brings us to the possibility that we've scorned someone who was genuinely trying to offer his help."

"Yeah, maybe so," Amber said. "But he could have given a better presentation if he wanted to make a good first impression."

Vicky nodded, but she couldn't think of anything else to say. She rubbed Amber's arm and listened to her breathing.

She thought that Amber had fallen asleep until Amber said, "Tell me about Ellen."

Vicky sighed. "I think maybe we would have gotten together, but then you came along, and Ellen got out of town for a few months. After that, we never really had a chance to connect with each other again."

Amber stared at her with a sad expression. "Do you ever have regrets?"

Vicky wanted to say no without hesitation. The lie would please Amber, but it would eat at her forever, and she had enough weight on her conscience already. "Yeah, I have some regrets, but they're what if questions that don't mean anything. What if I had accepted Ellen's other offers and didn't shy away from her?"

"You did that with her too?" Amber raised her arm to lay her hand on Vicky's cheek. "Why is it so hard for you to let anyone in?"

Vicky debated with herself before she started talking about William. The sun had fully risen by the time she was done. Amber listened quietly, remaining silent long after Vicky finished.

Vicky couldn't sleep. She didn't feel tired. After almost two years of trying to break down her shell, Amber had finally got Vicky to bare her secrets. Amber understood everything then, and Vicky could only wait to see how she would react.

Amber smiled. "So, you've always had a fixation on halflings. Is that why you didn't mention anything to me about my heritage until after Ellen brought it up?"

Vicky gaped at Amber while her mind whirled. The question was so out of left field that she wasn't sure what to say.

Amber's smile grew, and then Vicky laughed. "I gave my best effort at trying to scare you off, but nothing I did worked. Like every other halfling I've met, it drew you in faster."

Amber nodded. "You reeled me in, and now you're stuck with me. Possibly for forever. Can you live with that?"

"I think so. We just have to sort out how sex works between the two of us."

Amber lifted her shoulder in a half-shrug. "It can't be that hard to figure out. I don't know why you can't just experiment and see what happens." Amber raised her head, her face pulling into a thoughtful expression. "Or is that the problem? Am I supposed to be the driver?"

Yes, Vicky thought. Surprise registered as a blush on her cheeks, and her widening eyes and tensing mouth gave Amber an answer without Vicky saying a word.

If her expression didn't, her heart did. Amber had her hand resting on Vicky's chest, and the slow thumping beat surged to near-human speeds under her palm.

Amber moved to lay over Vicky, her mouth bowing up in a knowing smile. "All this time, I thought I was waiting on you to seduce me. But that isn't what you want."

Vicky didn't need to answer. Still, she shook her head and whispered, "No."

Amber lowered her head, brushing her lips against Vicky's throat. Vicky panted, leaning her head away to bare her neck to Amber.

Amber's breathy laughter spilled cool air over her skin. "Even if you are a vampire, you're still a woman. You still want to be pursued."

Vicky nodded, excited even more by the husky sound of Amber's whispering voice.

"Yes," she said, and then she moaned when Amber ran a fang over her pulsing jugular vein.

Amber mimicked Emil, teasing Vicky into a state of heightened sensitivity. Her mouth trailed down to Vicky's collarbone, and by then Vicky was writhing underneath her, whimpering her name in a pleading voice.

Amber's fangs pierced Vicky's skin, and the vampire's hands rose, her nails raking a trail of bright pink furrows from the base of Amber's neck to the small of her back.

Amber responded with a pleased moan, and her hands fumbled to pull off Vicky's top, tearing the fabric instead.

She released her bite and they separated to undress while they smiled lewdly at each other. "One of us should have a strap-on," Amber teased.

Vicky laughed, surprised at how soft and girlish the sound was. "Maybe next time."

Amber settled back on the bed, lowering her body to

offer herself to Vicky. Her hand slipped under her partner's neck to encourage her.

Vicky hesitated, curling her lips around her aching fangs.

"It's okay to let go," Amber whispered. "No matter what happens, it won't make me leave you."

Going into a bloodlust then was all too easy, and Vicky allowed herself to slip under. She bit into Amber's shoulder, drawing back on the wound. The feeling of hot blood splashing her throat was glorious, and Vicky's voice rose in an enraptured growl.

Vicky swallowed, another growl rising from her chest when Amber clawed her side. She almost let go of the wound, and then Amber whispered, "Take one more, lover."

Vicky did, her hair standing on end when Amber moaned in response.

She'd longed to share everything with Amber, to make the two of them partners in every way. But an exchange of blood, the most intimate act taken between vampires, was something she'd denied herself for fear of pushing Amber away.

Amber grabbed a handful of her hair to yank her head back, tearing Vicky's teeth away from her skin. The wound was already knitting back together, and Amber barely flinched from the pain.

She pulled Vicky's head up to kiss her, and their blood mingled on their tongues, cementing the union between them. Vicky was bound to Amber, freeing her from the last vestiges of

guilt that she'd held for not fighting to save William.

Amber's lips kissed away the years of loneliness. Her hands explored Vicky's body, scratching, petting and kneading away the last of Vicky's resistance. Even Emil couldn't push Vicky's senses to such a peak, and not since William had she felt so alive, loved and wanted.

Vicky drew in a deep breath and moaned her partners' name, her voice tense and warbling as she teetered on the peak of pleasure. Then her body convulsed with her climax, and the volume of her moans stunned her.

She had lost control of herself, giving everything to Amber.

When Vicky stilled and her voice dropped to a whimper, Amber pecked bloody kisses on her lips. Vicky closed her arms around Amber, her tired eyes staring up at her partner with a dazed look of awe.

She drew a shallow breath, hoping it would be enough to say three little words.

Their power reduced Vicky's voice to a whisper. "I love you."

Amber smiled and kissed her again. "I love you."

Nothing else needed to be said, and they laid together, gazing into each other's eyes until sleep pulled them down together.

Epilogue

Saturday March 14, 1998

Compressed in a dark nook behind the stairs of a basement, Dimitri watched Amber and Vicky through a scrying shadow. His natural bodiless form did not express emotion well, but if Dimitri had a face, it would have been glowering in confusion.

Recruiting Amber to work for him should have been easy. He knew her mind, and he thought he'd understood how far she had drifted away from her humanity. But showing her the truth didn't work out according to plan. In fact, she saw his efforts as an attack rather than an effort to gain her trust.

It didn't make sense. Certainly, he'd hurt her, but then so had the vampires. Emil abused Amber every night for weeks, and she seemed to care for him more every time he bit or scratched her. She suffered but a few days under the influence of the nightmare blood, and yet she acted like Dimitri had clawed her unborn child from her womb.

He gave her gifts to make up for his mistake, and she called the spells he taught parlor tricks. He gave her immortality. He gave her power, even a blessing which would allow her to block him out of her thoughts. She called the thunderstone a trinket, and still she wouldn't forgive him for one minor slight.

Why? Because he was evil.

Dimitri wanted to be angry. Was she so much better, just because she was amoral?

He had been angry with her, which is why he stupidly uttered his threat that Amber would regret crossing him. In the distant past, he would have killed her and all the vampires right then and there, just to make a point.

But Amber was right. He'd gone about recruiting allies all wrong, and he had "fucked up, but good."

Dimitri closed the scrying shadow and considered what to do next. He had no desire to return to Lissand. After serving his prison sentence inside a tree for thousands of years, the last thing he wanted was to live in the endless forests of the elf world.

He could travel back to the northern tundra, but the sight of his people lost in apathy angered him. How could anyone stay locked on a "reserve," feeding on what few scraps the other races would allow them? He thought no one could, but he saw many of the wyrm accept the compromise. They raised one or two wraiths per year, only to see most cut down by the dwarfs and the shadow hunters for wandering where they didn't belong.

It wasn't a life. It was a never-ending prison sentence.

But the human world offered him no place for refuge either. He could frighten the humans for a short time, but he was not so deluded to think himself a god, and he believed the humans would quickly find a way to exploit one of his weaknesses. If they could not kill him, they would at least drive him away.

Again.

He could find no allies in either world, and even his own people had given up and accepted the status quo.

But, perhaps there was a way to motivate the wyrm into taking back their place on Earth. The daemons were sending scouts to the human world, and the elves did nothing. So perhaps if Dimitri restricted his scheming to the Earth plane, they might overlook his efforts? Then, by proving that the jailers didn't care to protect Earth, Dimitri might have a chance to convince the wyrm to leave Lissand en masse.

Excited by the idea, Dimitri waited until sunset. He slipped into a shadow portal and sped out of the house, roving the city until he found a ley line.

The line was in the middle of a residential section, but thousands of years before, Dimitri remembered when the spot had been marked by a temple.

Humans moved on to other gods, other religions, and over time, they forgot about the power sources thriving under their feet.

Dimitri looked around at the houses, humbled by the changes that had taken place in the humans while he served his sentence in Lissand. The humans had forgotten so much of the old ways, and yet they made up for it with their ability to craft tools for every need. All along the street, people slept in climate controlled comfort. Their freezers and pantries stocked constantly with food, they wanted for nothing. And yet, still they wanted more.

Dimitri did too, and he grudgingly admitted there wasn't much difference between himself and the humans. He wanted to raise a family and eat well. He wanted to live in comfort, free from fear or uncertainty about his place in the world.

Only, he had no place in the world.

In *any* world.

Like Amber, he was just another stray. Amber found a place to belong, and she had gotten herself adopted by a new family. Dimitri wondered if perhaps that was what caused her to turn down his offer. What he asked from her was too great a risk to the coven.

Dimitri could understand that, if it were the case. But he didn't feel the same way about his own offspring. He could put one of his children in harm's way without a second thought.

Amber was not evil, simply amoral. The vampires were similarly amoral, which is why she had found a place among them. But she was not evil, and she could never ally herself with a creature who was.

Again, he could understand, but he still wanted his own place in the world, and if he could not find allies on Earth, well then, he could make an ally.

Dimitri sent an impulse out, compelling the humans into an unnaturally deep sleep.

When he was assured that he would not be disturbed, he lay across the street, spreading himself as thin as he could manage. Drawing energy from the ley line, Dimitri tore away a section of his amorphous body. He contracted rapidly once the break was complete. His senses became numb, deafening him to the thoughts of the humans briefly. He was able to recover within seconds, as the pain of separation was more psychic than physical.

Moving his body back out as thin as it would spread, he covered the lifeless fragment and infused it with energy from the ley line. Far from being a simple matter, the transfer of pure energy took every ounce of mental strength he had, and the air was filled with a loud thrumming during the process.

Dimitri had to rest for nearly an hour before he could go on. He sipped blood from his reserves to regenerate, and then he focused his will to imbue a part of his own malevolent spirit into the pulsing husk. This task, at least, was easier for both parent and child.

A soft hiss emanated from the new life form, and with every pulse, the shadow grew. Dimitri contracted his body and drew away from the child. It expanded outward, and the hiss rose to a shriek as the newborn wraith rose up from the ground.

The wraith's senses cast out to look for prey. It found the body of its parent first and flattened itself to the ground, falling silent in deference.

Dimitri telepathically sent the newborn wraith a selection of his memories, giving his child a knowledge of the world, and of magic. The wraith could pass the memories on to its offspring, and each one of his children would carry out his orders with undying loyalty.

Use the humans to build your ranks, Dimitri commanded. Avoid exposing yourself, and do not eat anyone who bears a foreign scent.

He extended a part of his body as a tendril, then drew upon the reserves of blood hidden inside his feeding spell.

Silver blood dripped from his body, and the wraith slid closer to feast upon the tiny puddle.

Do exactly as I say, and I will give you a larger reward when I return, Dimitri sent. *Go now, and begin raising an army for me.*

The unicorn blood flowed through the wraith's body, filling the young creature with an unnatural hunger. It blurred down the street, its rapidly developing mind already seeking out a fertile human female to impregnate.

Dimitri sent out an impulse to pull everyone from their slumber. He wanted to give them a sporting chance, and leaving them locked in a comatose state while the wraith fed was...what was it?

Dimitri decided it was fiendish, a level of evil which he wasn't ready to approach anymore. Killing the humans was one thing, but they should at least have a half a chance of fighting back. Which is why he would go home, and leave the neighborhood to deal with one weak, infantile wraith.

What could be more fair than that?

The wraith veered toward a house, and within seconds, it located a victim, screeching in excitement before it fed from the petrified woman and impregnated her with a part of its body.

Dimitri turned his attention to the task of opening a portal back into Lissand. Bright light flashed above him as the portal yawned open, and he resisted the urge to shrink back though the light stung him. *At least it's not sunlight,* he thought.

The light slipped around his body, and then the sounds

of the Earth insects faded away, replaced by the buzzes, clicks, and chirps from the larger species from Lissand. Above him, the cloudy Earth sky was replaced by a clear field of stars.

The change in the air was less subtle. Lissand smelled wild, an odor which was full of natural decay. The smells of rotting animals and vegetation was not cleaner smelling than Earth, but it was less polluted.

Dimitri couldn't decide which environment he preferred.

He rose up into a humanoid form, lifting his head to watch with keen interest as a gryphon passed above him. Dimitri moved swiftly to follow his prey, leaping from the ground before he became an intangible shadow and rose up into the air.

After feasting, it would be a long trip back to the northern tundra, where he could watch his army grow and wait to see how the other factions reacted to his invasion plans.

He was relatively sure the elves would respond as they always did to problems on Earth. After being run off from the Earth plane, the elves had no love left for the humans.

They would remain in Lissand so long as Dimitri didn't repeat old mistakes by leaving portals into Lissand open. All the elves cared about was keeping their sanctuary safe from the humans, and since Dimitri had no plans to leave any portals open, he had little to fear from his former wardens.

But he wasn't so sure about the daemons. After all, the daemons and the wyrm had conflicting agendas. The daemons wanted to bathe the Earth in fire, and doing so would leave the world barren and without a food supply for the wyrm.

Which made them enemies, even if they were both evil. So the daemons might not care for the appearance of even one wraith on Earth.

He didn't care how the daemons reacted, and so long as the elves didn't stick him in another sapling for a few thousand years, he didn't care how they reacted either.

But how would his people react?

That was who he hoped to stir into action. Would the other wyrm also begin sending children to Earth, or would they ignore his protest and continue living in quiet desperation?

No, some of his people had to be as tired of the compromise as he was. They were creatures of evil, and if he proved their cage had no bars, then the rest of the wyrm would surely follow him back to Earth. The day that happened, there would be a feast the likes of which had not been seen on Earth for sixteen thousand years.

Then the long reign of the humans would finally be over.

The End?

